

BIG VIEWS, NO CROWDS (P. 16)

BACKPACKER

THE OUTDOORS AT YOUR DOORSTEP

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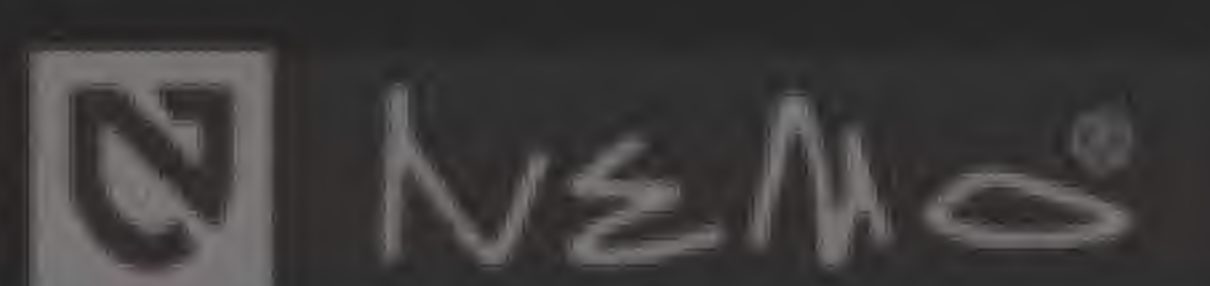
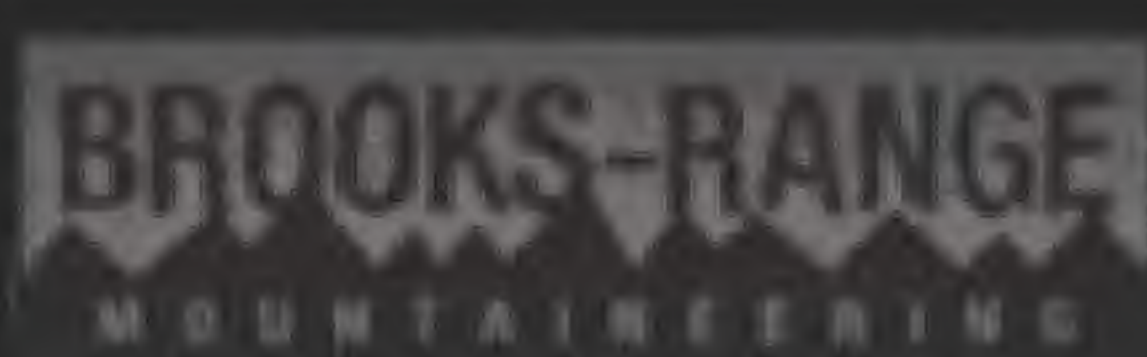
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BY CASEY LYONS

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Sacred
Headwaters
area, British
Columbia

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El Capitan

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"Lighten Up"

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BACKPACKER

THE OUTDOORS AT YOUR DOORSTEP

STAFF PICKS Favorite loop hike (see more on page 66)

Tri-Forest Peak-Deer Creek Loop, Trinity Alps Wilderness, CA

Northern Presidential Loop, NH

Triple Pass Loop, CO

Seven Lakes Loop, Olympic National Park

Haunted Canyon/Bull Basin Loop, Superstition Wilderness, AZ

Grafton Loop, ME (see page 73)

Floe Lake Rockwall Circuit, Banff National Park

Lake Ediza, Mt. Ritter, and Thousand Island Lake via Devil's Postpile, Ansel Adams Wilderness, CA (see page 71)

Bill Hall Trail to Thunder River up Deer Creek, Grand Canyon National Park

Any DIY loop in Denali National Park

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Remember When Tents Didn't Have Lights...



Dancing in the moonlight in Indian Basin,
Wind River Range, WY – Braden Gunem



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editor's note

BY DENNIS LEWON

Best Job Ever

Explore national parks.
Travel the country.
Share exciting stories.
Wish it would never end.



The corner office view of Grand Teton National Park

Climb the Grand Teton with BACKPACKER

Join me and other staffers on one of the country's most iconic climbs this summer—and have a great time while raising money for a great cause. The benefit climb helps Big City Mountaineers, a nonprofit that mentors under-resourced urban youth in the wilderness. It's like a walkathon for people who love mountains, and donations go to a program that changes kids' lives through the power of the outdoors. Oh, and did I mention the free gear climbers get from Black Diamond, JanSport, SmartWool, Liberty Bottleworks, Sole, and Thule?

The details

The three-day trip is guided by Jackson Hole Mountain Guides, and no climbing experience is necessary. There are four trip dates to choose from (but space is limited):

July 17-19 with Editor-in-Chief Dennis Lewon

July 19-21 women's-only trip with Senior Editor Rachel Zurer

July 21-23 with Senior Editor Casey Lyons

July 23-25 with photographer Andrew Bydlon

For more information or to apply for a spot on the team, go to backpacker.com/sfs.

W

WHEN I TELL people where I work, the response is consistent: "Wow, that sounds incredible—must be a dream job!" It's a good gig, to be sure, but the truth is I spend most of my time in an office, just like you. A better job would entail doing the stuff we write about full time.

Traveling from trailhead to trailhead. Camping under the stars until the constellations appear in your dreams. Seeing bears and bighorn sheep on a weekly basis.

Amazingly, that job does exist. I can't apply, but you can. In honor of the upcoming 100th anniversary of the National Park Service, in 2016, we're hiring a team of two to be our special national park scouts. What could be more fitting for the centennial of the agency in charge of America's Best Idea (thanks Ken Burns) than creating America's Best Job?

The "work" is straightforward: This summer, a winning team of two will hit the road with backpacking gear and a simple agenda: Explore national parks, find great adventures, and meet some of the 280 million people who visit our parks every year. Then share those experiences in these pages and on our website and social channels.

The qualifications? As a human resources professional might put it: The ideal candidates will have proven photo and video skills. They will have at least five years of backpacking experience, or equivalent. They will be friendly. They won't mind missing a shower or two. They won't object to using the latest outdoor gear. They will enjoy telling stories.

If this sounds like your dream job, get more details and learn how to apply at backpacker.com/centennialscouts. I guarantee it'll be the best gig in the outdoors. And I should know.

On My Feet



The best way to get your lungs in shape for the hiking season? Trail running (see page 35 for tips on getting out while the trails are still wet). I've been using the Altra Lone Peak 2.0 on my local hill, where a rocky path climbs nearly 1,500 feet in just over a mile. I love the minimalist feel of the zero-drop profile, but the thick EVA midsole provides much-needed cushion. Plus: The wide toe box lets my forefoot push off more naturally. \$120; 1 lb. 10 oz. (pair, men's 11); altrarunning.com



apples

dates

almonds

raisins

walnuts



cinnamon



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#trailchat

YOUR OPINIONS, PHOTOS, AND FEATS

Overheard

Readers were decidedly split over Gregg Hein's harrowing survival tale ["Out Alive," November 2014]. "Boy, did he luck out," **Marc Johnson** writes. "Going out alone isn't worth it." **Sonya Dickinson** disagrees: "There is much reward to be gained from solo backpacking... Accidents can happen to any of us at any time (even in your own home!) and how one reacts can mean the difference between life and death. Gregg was well prepared, both physically and mentally, which is why he is still here with us today."



KEITH HADLEY, MEANWHILE, OFFERS THIS SAGE MANTRA:

"WITH SOLITUDE COMES RISK. LUCK OR SKILL WILL BE YOUR GUIDE. ONLY ONE IS SURE."

"In the October issue, you list Nashville as related to leaf peeping in the Smokies... I think the city you are looking for is Knoxville," **Doug Meade** writes. "Nashville is a four-hour drive from the Smokies, and Mt. Cammerer is probably more like five, as it is on the east side of the park. Just trying to help so people don't think they can hop in the car and be there in 30 minutes!"

Editor's note: We can't argue with your geography lesson, Doug, but we stand by our advice for Music City hikers. Acceptable driving distance is directly related to payoff. And when spring wildflowers or fall foliage peak in the Smokies, we say leave work early on Friday afternoon and enjoy the ride.



It's five o'clock somewhere, right? @steve_yocum nailed this Instagram shot on the Blackrock Trail near Waynesville, NC.

Trending

Spring 2015 Gear Preview

Get a first look at the year's hottest gear this month on our social media channels.



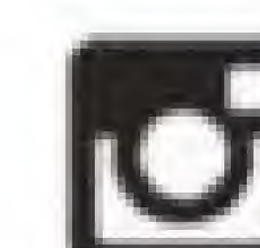
Learn about the latest gear innovations from designers, athletes, and testers with our weekly expert Q&As. **PLUS:** Rankings of top products, companies, materials, and more.



Need gear advice? Ask the pro! Kristin Hostetter will answer reader questions LIVE on February 10 at 1 p.m. EST (@BackpackerMag).



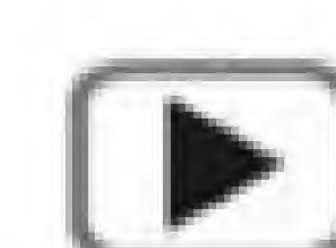
Start planning glorious spring getaways with Season Starter trips: pinterest.com/backpackermag/Spring.



Tag pics showing your favorite gear with the hashtag #BPMag for a chance to be regrammed by us (@BackpackerMag).



Check out photos from our Editors' Choice trip to California and see the rigorous trail-testing that goes into every review: backpacker.com/ECCalifornia.



After putting hundreds of products to the test, we're handing out Editors' Choice Awards. See videos of new winners every day starting Feb. 25: backpacker.com/EC2015.

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#trailchat

YOUR OPINIONS, PHOTOS, AND FEATS

Overheard

"I read an extremely positive review about MontBell's Frost Line Parka in your November 2014 issue [page 54]," says [Brian Gura](#). "Alas, MontBell does not make its apparel in XXL sizes, so I can't wear MontBell stuff. That limitation ought to be made clear."

Gear Editor Kristin Hostetter responds: *We hear you, Brian. In the future, we'll indicate whether a given item is available in sizes outside of the typical S-XL range (like the Duckworth Comet, page 53).*

Readers were overwhelmingly excited about seeing *Wild* on the big screen after our interview with Cheryl Strayed ["#trailchat," January 2015]—with a few reservations. "How many inexperienced hipsters are going to want to hike the PCT after seeing this movie?" [David Christensen](#) wondered. "I hope the rangers are prepared to start rescuing people." [Eli Marr](#), meanwhile, was horrified at the size of Reese Witherspoon's 'Monster' pack: "I just want to take it apart and redo it UL style."

Got a comment or trail photo to share? Send feedback to letters@backpacker.com.

Fired Up

Is there any reason you bring a blowtorch into the backcountry? The Snow Peak Gigapower 2Way (\$40; snowpeak.com) piqued our curiosity, so our senior editor tested a few potential uses. See the videos (and send us your ideas) at backpacker.com/firetest.



A brief and wildly incomplete list of things you should never attempt to do with a blowtorch:

Dry out your socks
Unfreeze a water bottle
Roast marshmallows
Light a cigarette
Explore a cave
Reheat leftovers



Via Facebook, [Michelle Hill](#) shared this awesome wake-up shot from her mid-October hike to the Young Lakes region of Yosemite National Park. "The pictures you post on Facebook are my inspiration to get out there and do something," she says. Happy to help!

Smackdown of the Month: Hammocks

PRO

"Sleep better. Travel better. Survive better. Teardown speed and weight are about the same or better than bivvies. No crawling, and no crawlies. You're always up off the wet ground. You don't need a flat spot, there's no competition for sites, and they're far more LNT-friendly."

—@steveflinn

CON

"Bugs. Rain. Wrestling to get in and out in the dark. Can't sleep and bored? Tough! Your gear is out of reach. Cold during the night? Nothing you can do but lie there with zero insulation. Want to reposition? Hah! Expect to wake up every half-hour with your limbs asleep. Hammocks were created as an ancient torture device and work well!"

—@bigcheesestick

YOUR VOTES



68%



32%

LNT 101

Better Than You Found It

More than 20 years after its debut, the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics (lnt.org) is still shaping the way backpackers experience the wilderness. We asked Facebook fans to weigh in with their own best practices.

If you eat anything that comes in a wrapper, tear it in such a way that it stays in one piece. Don't tear off a tiny corner that will be easily lost. Sounds like a small thing, but it can help you realize how not to cut corners in other ways. —Drew Lee

If kids are involved, make it a game. Teenagers do very well if they are working on their mad ninja skills. —Marc Barringer

Pretend every behavior is multiplied by 50,000 and then consider: Do I want that many orange peels here next time I visit? —Dawna North

Designate one pocket for trash on the trail and make an intentional effort to load it up with small pieces of garbage.

Remember which one it is, though: You don't want to stick your Clif Bar in with all the cigarette butts. —Matt Kesner

Only burn sticks that can be broken by hand... no jumbo fireplace logs! —Jamie Wilson

Lasting impact

Time it takes six common objects to decompose



The Subaru Legacy® Like snow other.



Introducing the all-new 2015 Subaru Legacy. It's not just a sedan. It's a Subaru. Symmetrical All-Wheel Drive with 36 mpg* cuts through the snow. Being named a 2014 IIHS Top Safety Pick lets you take on the season with confidence. Winters will never be the same. **Love. It's what makes a Subaru, a Subaru.**



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Subaru and Legacy are registered trademarks. *EPA-estimated hwy fuel economy for 2015 Subaru Legacy 2.5i models. Actual mileage may vary. †MSRP excludes destination and delivery charges, tax, title, and registration fees. Retailer sets actual price. 2015 Subaru Legacy 2.5i Limited pictured has an MSRP of \$26,495.

014

03.2015

the go list

23 places to hike now



1

Basecamp in Style **Smith Rock State** **Park, OR**

We get it, winter camping isn't for everyone. If the idea of tenting through the cold months makes you cry ice cubes, then dust off your gear and head out to spring-perfect Smith Rock State Park. But don't kill yourself on this season's first trip. Ease in. Here's your plan: Set up a luxe basecamp on a cliffside site at this car campground, then dayhike the 650-acre park. Photographer Dan Kennedy

already scouted it for you: From the bivouac area (\$5/person/night), head out on the Rope-De-Dope Trail, which winds .4 mile through pines to a junction with the Canyon Trail. Take the Canyon Trail west along the Crooked River, a tributary of the Deschutes. From here, it's choose-your-own-adventure, as this path will link you with any of the central Oregon park's trails, including the Summit and River Trails, which circumnavigate the whole thing in about 6 miles. **Contact** bit.do/SmithRocksSP

2

LIFE LIST

Yosemite's Secret Hut

Why visit iconic Glacier Point with the rest of the tourists when you can ski there—and have it all to yourself?

By Will Rochfort

T

This is the first time all winter I've finished dinner in time to savor the sunset. When the camp dining table sits opposite one of the most imposing edifices in North

America, you don't miss your reservation. My cohorts and I clank double-walled mugs, toasting not just to the evening light on Half Dome, but also to our discovery. We're at one of the most famous landmarks in one of the most popular national parks in the world, and there's not another soul in sight.

Every summer, the Glacier Point Ski Hut masquerades as a souvenir shop, but during the winter it transforms into a 20-person chalet atop one of the premier overlooks in

Yosemite, complete with plumbing, a full kitchen, and, possibly the best perk, home-made breakfast and dinner. When snow closes the road to Glacier Point (typically from November to April), the only way to access it is via a 10.5-mile cross-country ski from the Badger Pass Ski Area.


I had wanted to try my hand at Nordic skiing, so when I found this gem buried on the second page of a Google search for "great cross-country skiing in California," I reserved a spot immediately. Ideal for first-timers like me, the trip's easy logistics were hard to pass up.

Thanks to the Sierra's famously benign winters (Yosemite's average winter *low* is just barely sub-freezing) and the meals waiting for us at the hut, I hauled a pleasantly

light pack as we cruised across the neatly groomed, beginner-friendly Glacier Point Road Ski Trail. I could have knocked out the easy 10.5 miles to the hut in a few hours, but why rush through the tour's best scenery? We stopped at the Clark Range Overlook (near mile 6) and Washburn Point (mile 10) to admire unobstructed views of the High Sierras and Half Dome.

When we reached the wooden hut, we smelled lasagna baking in the oven, which our hutkeeper Bjørnie served for dinner with a hefty helping of salad, and enough red wine to help me forget the dank mountain hovels that used to serve as my mental reference for ski huts.

At 11 p.m., after playing cards around the wood-burning stove, Bjørnie ushers us



From the Glacier Point Ski Hut, dayhike about 4 miles to Taft Point for this view of El Capitan.

under the stars to listen to the waterfalls from the edge of Glacier Point. This must be how Muir and Teddy felt more than a century ago—having Yosemite to themselves. We return to the shelter's ring of plush sofas to warm up before retiring to our bunks.

In the morning, we catch the sunrise over Half Dome's shoulder before debating the day's biggest quandary over a breakfast of oatmeal, fruit, and yogurt: Today, should we dayhike to Taft Point, Panorama Point, or Sentinel Dome? We'll certainly be the only ones at each, so how do you choose?

We strap on old-school snowshoes provided to hut visitors and head out the door. Maybe we can hit all three spots if we hurry! No matter. Wherever we wander, we know that at the end of the day the Glacier Point

Ski Hut—and another fresh-cooked meal—will be awaiting us.

If there's a better secret in the entire national park system, I can't wait to find it.

DO IT Trailhead 37.664833, -119.663472; 53 miles northeast of Mariposa **Permit** Required (free) along with reservations for the ski hut (\$146/person/night self-guided or \$350 guided). Pick up the former at Badger Pass Ski Area. At least six people must be staying in the hut, and you can rent out the whole thing. We recommend reserving a few weeks ahead of time (a few months if you're aiming for a holiday weekend). **Season** December through March **Contact** (209) 372-8444; yosemitepark.com/glacier-point-hut

No. 03

Join one of the country's biggest hiking clubs.

→ **Calling all Angelenos:** What are you doing Tuesday after work? Answer: helping the 213 Hikers become an even stronger hiking club. Every Tuesday night at 6:45 p.m., more than 100 people meet in

Griffith Park for communal hikes divided by experience levels. Learn more at 213hikers.com and join the fun.

Not from Los Angeles? Visit hiking.meetup.com to find a hiking club near you.



04 **Spy a gray wolf in the wild. Two decades after the predators were controversially reintroduced to Yellowstone, the park is now home to an estimated 95 wolves.**

No. 05

See the tallest frozen waterfall in Colorado.




→ **You don't have to be an ice climber to appreciate this natural wonder.** From November to May (typically), 365-foot Bridal Veil Falls outside Telluride freezes solid. See it on a 3.5-mile out-and-back via Bridal Veil Falls Road. Don't forget snowshoes.

No. 6

Play the Slots

San Rafael Swell, UT

But make sure you don't gamble too much. "I nearly killed myself getting this shot," says photographer Ryan Bonneau of the bird's-eye vantage over Little Wild Horse Canyon in Utah. More than 15 feet below, Bonneau's hiking partner winds through the sinuous slot on an 8-mile loop that links Little Wild Horse and Bell Canyons within the San Rafael Swell. In places, the walls reach nearly 100 feet high. Get out there this month for solitude, ideal temps (daytime highs in the 50s), and typically dry (read: safe) weather. **Contact** bit.do/SanRafaelBLM



7

Embrace the Big Freeze
Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, WI

Old Man Winter can make his own secret passageways. Case in point: the twisting sea caves on Sand Island's Swallow Point that freeze over when temps drop. Most will visit the Apostle Islands' mainland to see the phenomenon, but photographer Ian Plant suggests crossing Lake Superior about 3 miles (if it's frozen; call ahead to check) to Swallow Point on the northeast shore of Sand Island. There, you can see the constantly changing, fairyland-like caves away from the tourists. Contact [nps.gov/apis](https://www.nps.gov/apis)



THE EXPERIENCE

8

Earn Your Turns: Backcountry Skiing

Why go high in winter? Because going down is so much fun.
BY MAREN HORJUS

→“YOU’RE CLEAR!” my partner shouts. Or was it, “You’re not clear!”? Between the whipping wind and my pounding heart, my ears are picking up every third word. My skis hang over the edge of the cornice overlooking the central Tyndall Gorge in Rocky Mountain National Park. Below the drop-off, the narrow, near-vertical Dragon’s Tail couloir twists between granite spires like a bobsled track. Despite fantasizing about this exact moment for the few hours it took to climb here, my brain offers a final, firm protest against madness and gravity. Then, my partner gives the thumbs up, our signal that he’s in position to watch me (a safety precaution). My stomach drops. I take a deep breath and will myself forward

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) JEFF DIENER; JOHN JAY;
LAKESUPERIORPHOTO; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM



◀ Plan to bootpack the steepest slopes (like the Diagonal Couloir in Wyoming's Absarokas).
▼ Skiers observe their handiwork in Oregon's Wallowas.



a few long inches.

Objects in free fall accelerate at 9.8 meters per second. Squared. Thankfully, I land after a mere 4 feet—far less than my fear seemed to suggest—and suddenly my muscle memory kicks in. I send a series of quick turns through the rock garden to regain my balance and let my brain catch up with what's happening. Speeding through the technical piece, my confidence surges and I remember how much I love skiing—*fast*. I streak down the 50-degree slope toward the chute, granite walls closing in around me. I fight the urge to kick a tail out to scrub speed—I didn't spend my whole morning climbing this mountain to ease down the best part. In seconds, I skirt a corner around a jagged crag and the gully widens to 20 feet before it deposits me in the White Room.

Glee replaces nerves as I soar, arcing huge turns on the dreamy-soft, 30-degree face. When I cruise to a stop on the frozen lake, I topple over into a cloud of golden spindrift, giggling like an idiot.

A skier (since I was five) with a relatively newfound zeal for hiking, I nearly defected completely from the traffic-choked world of resort skiing when I discovered its backcountry superior a few years ago. What better way to maximize winter than to take the best of hiking—solitude, exercise, exploration, scenery—and combine it with skiing? There's a sort of humility required in the sport that drew me in, too, because there aren't patrol teams managing risk for you in the backcountry. You need to manage your own, carefully, through

route-planning, studying the snowpack, waiting for the weather to align just right, and trusting your partner. I appreciated the reminder about the power of wilderness, so, two winters ago, I bought climbing skins, touring bindings, and safety equipment (all of which you can rent), to transform my resort setup into a backcountry-ready system.

My first tour involved a 5-mile skin to a broad, 25-degree slope—the equivalent of a resort green-circle run. It didn't matter, though. The anticipation of plowing my own tracks through ungroomed snow drove me up the mountain (a physical effort that fends off cold toes even down to -25°F, in my experience).

Today, we skinned 3 miles covering some 3,500 feet of elevation gain to finally send the Dragon's Tail. By most counts, the exchange rate in backcountry skiing is poor. For every descent, you owe the mountain gods a demanding, hours-long cardio workout. In return, you get lonely, often untracked slopes.

We pushed the pace through the spruce and fir forest so we might be able to lap the descent before the afternoon (when the sun often bakes the snowpack into avalanche-prone slabs) and reached Emerald Lake before 7 a.m. In summer, it's a turquoise pool seated below Flattop Mountain's granite, diadem-like spires; but today, it's a staging area below some of the state's most dramatic couloirs. They can hold more than 20 feet of snow.

We'd already ascended 800 feet, but we needed to triple that in the next half-mile. I started up the mountain, cutting a trail through the snow. Lifting my heel, I dragged my leg forward while maintaining as much of my ski's skin-covered base on the snow's surface as possible for traction. By the time I stood below the granite corridor, the sunshine painted the walls a brilliant orange. I clicked out of my bindings and strapped my skis to my pack—the slope above was too steep for skinning. I could have turned around and cruised down the 30-degree white apron, slashing turns in the pristine slope, and it'd still be worth it. But, I'd been meditating on the 50-degree couloir for the entire climb, so I kick-stepped up the chute.

At the top, I began shivering, but I wasn't cold. I inched to the lip of the cornice and breathed. My partner gave the signal. Time to fly.

Assistant Editor Maren Horjus blogs about skiing, slaying, slarving, shredding, and, occasionally, tomahawking in the backcountry at backpacker.com/backcountryskiing.



Gear up with our top ski and boot picks. Download our (free!) Fall Gear Guide iPad edition at backpacker.com/ipad or get it online at backpacker.com/FGG14.



Venture inside ice caves.

→ Make the most of the season's deep freeze. Bundle up and venture inside Lake Superior's famed ice caves via a short hike or snowshoe. [Hikers](http://Hikers.com)

in the Upper Peninsula (or eastern Wisconsin) should skip the long drive to Apostle Islands (see page 19) and head to Grand Island, just a .6-mile hike north across frozen Lake Superior from Munising, Michigan. On Grand Island's southern shore, frozen curtains of ice hide the awesome caves. Learn more at grandislandup.com.



No.10 Bask in all the gear.

If you subscribe to the gear-is-a-way-of-life philosophy, then you should attend the 10th annual Adirondack Sports & Fitness Summer Expo on March 7 and 8 at the Saratoga City Center in New York. The show features 125 exhibitors, gear sales, clinics, and giveaways. Best part? It's free! Use the money you saved for more gear. Duh. Info.adksports.com

No. 11 Post a selfie in Yellowstone.

→ The lack of 4G cramping your style? Not to worry: Officials in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks are considering adding fiber optic cable that will improve connectivity. Just don't get too close to that bison when trying to impress friends back home. Good idea? Just 14 percent of readers think so.



Bridge the Gap

Earth is the first and best architect. See Ma Nature's oeuvre of natural arches on these dayhikes. BY KRISTEN POPE

DONE IN A DAY

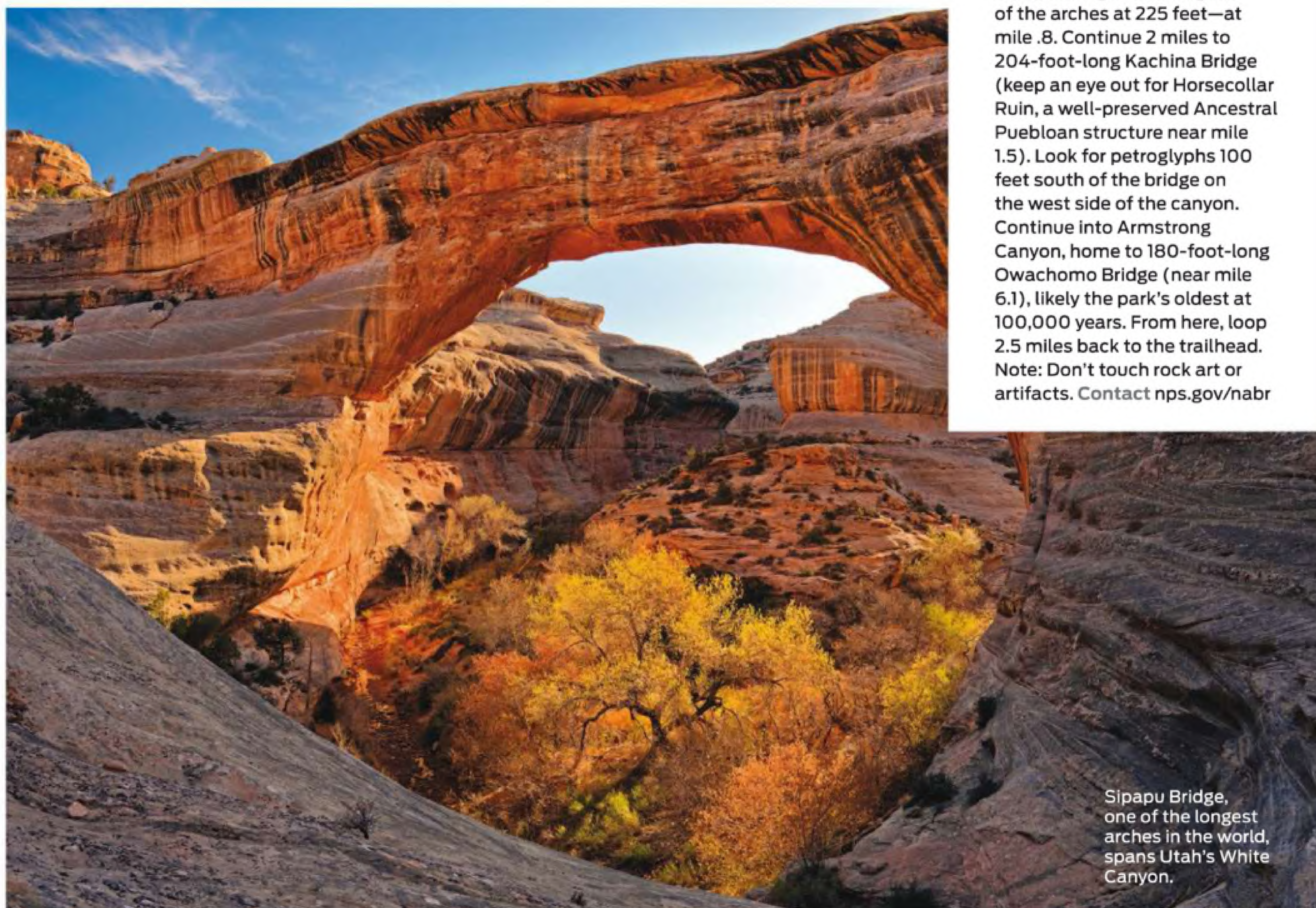
12

Loop Trail,
Natural
Bridges
National
Monument

UTAH

→ Walk by three—yes, three—arches on an 8.6-mile dayhike that passes Ancestral Puebloan ruins. On the Loop Trail, you'll be privy to front-row views of Sipapu, Kachina, and Owachomo

Bridges. Head out from the Sipapu Bridge trailhead and reach Sipapu Bridge—the longest of the arches at 225 feet—at mile .8. Continue 2 miles to 204-foot-long Kachina Bridge (keep an eye out for Horsecollar Ruin, a well-preserved Ancestral Puebloan structure near mile 1.5). Look for petroglyphs 100 feet south of the bridge on the west side of the canyon. Continue into Armstrong Canyon, home to 180-foot-long Owachomo Bridge (near mile 6.1), likely the park's oldest at 100,000 years. From here, loop 2.5 miles back to the trailhead. Note: Don't touch rock art or artifacts. Contact nps.gov/nabr



Sipapu Bridge, one of the longest arches in the world, spans Utah's White Canyon.

Auxier Ridge
Loop, Daniel
Boone Na-
tional Forest

KENTUCKY

If more is better, then the Red River Gorge Geological Area is best in class with more than 100 natural arches—the highest concentra-

tion east of the Mississippi. We like the 6.1-mile Auxier Ridge Loop, which grants a panorama of the arch-rich gorge en route to a double arch. Take off on Auxier Ridge Trail #204, heading north through rhododendrons (blooming pink in June and July). Reach 90-foot-tall Courthouse Rock

at mile 2, and then hike south on Trail #203 to a spur near mile 3.1. Veer north .8 mile to reach Double Arch for a cool perspective of the valley from the two 20-foot-wide windows. Retrace your steps to Trail #203 and continue south on #201 to the trailhead. Contact fs.usda.gov/main/dbnf

Indian Mocca-
sin/ Whitetail
Trails Loop,
Natural Bridge
State Park

WISCONSIN

Nab Wisconsin's largest natural bridge on this 4-mile loop in one of the states' least-visited parks.

Start from the picnic area, following the Indian Moccasin Trail. Reach 35-foot-long Natural Bridge at mile .6; below the arch, see the Radatz Rockshelter, the oldest-known site of human habitation in the upper Midwest (12,000 years old). Researchers believe Paleoamer-


icans stayed in the 1,800-square-foot hut while heading north to hunt mastodon and musk oxen. (Don't touch.) Rare plants like purple cliff-brake sprout from the surrounding walls. Continue to the Whitetail Trail at mile 1.5; take it back to the trailhead. Contact bit.do/NatBridgeWisc



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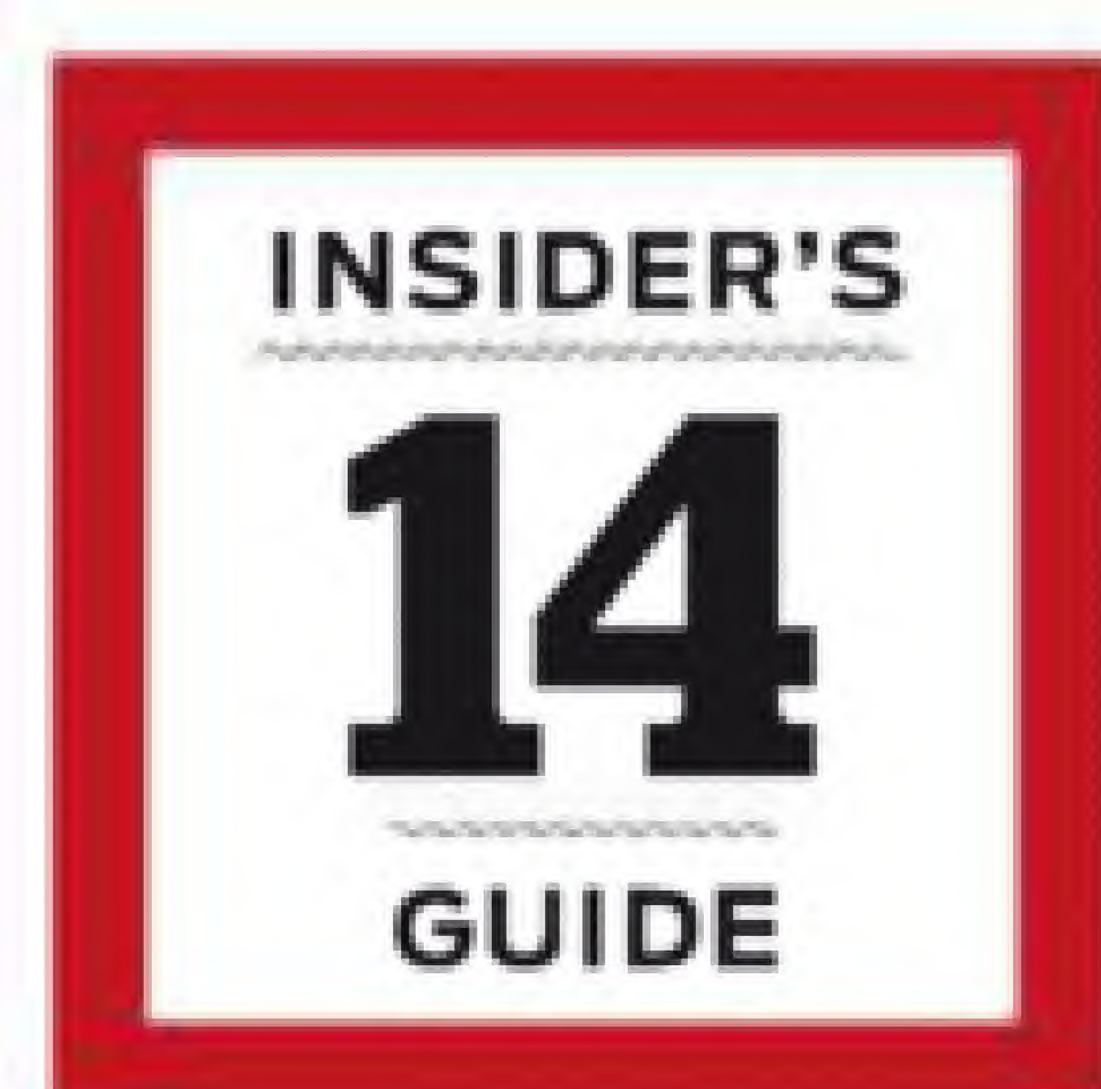
www.explorefairbanks.com

13

Hit the Beach Olympic National Park, WA

There are no bad days at Point of Arches, a mile-long spectacle of dramatic seastacks on the Washington coast. But there are really, really good days, like this one captured by photographer Floris van Breugel. You have to time it right to see the eroded sedimentary rock exposed like this, he says. “You want the tide low enough that it isn’t covering the rocks, but high enough that it flows between them.” But don’t fill your memory card with just this one scene because it gets better: beach camping and driftwood fires. Get to Shi Shi (pronounced, “shy-shy”) Beach via the Makah Shi Shi trailhead on the Makah Indian Reservation (requires its own \$10 permit). Hit the beach near mile 2, then continue along the shore another 2 miles. Find a campsite on the beach or in the adjacent forest. “The Park Service recommends visiting the coast in summer, which is sound advice for longer treks with river crossings,” van Breugel says, “but if you get the right weather window, winter is far more beautiful—less people and clearer skies.” **Contact** [nps.gov/olym](https://www.nps.gov/olym)





Spring's best national park Big Bend, Texas

When locals say that everything is bigger in Texas—well, they've got a point. You'll believe it after setting eyes on this seemingly endless topography (1,200 square miles) carved by giant river canyons and punctuated with far-flung peaks and outcrops. And that's not all that's extreme. The night sky? It's darker. Cacti? Forty-six species. The hikers? They're extremely satisfied.

BY KIM PHILLIPS

The insider

Writer and photographer Laurence Parent has written 29 books on the region. "Even during the spring peak hiking season," he says, "there are places you can have all to yourself."

Plan to basecamp

Backcountry water is mostly unreliable, making dayhikes a good choice. Hit up the park's dirt roads for private, primitive campsites (high-clearance vehicles recommended). The Terlingua Abajo sites, backdropped by Mesa de Anguila's limestone cliffs, are

Parent's top pick when exploring the park's western reaches (the sites are 11.4 miles southwest from Maverick Junction). "It has a creek and ruins from an old farming community," he says.



Top dayhike

Parent's tip for the popular 4.8-mile (round-trip) Lost Mine Trail? "Head out late in the day, pack a headlamp, and linger until sunset." The route climbs to a 6,800-foot ridge, with views of cliffy outcrops and dusky foothills fading into the distance.

Get off the beaten track

If you're willing to haul in your water, there's an overnight well worth doing, Parent says. The Mesa de Anguila—bordering the park's southwestern boundary—is secluded even by Big Bend

standards. To avoid exposed cliffs on the mesa's east side, start from the western Lajitas trailhead. Navigate a faded, cairn-lined trail .9 mile to the base of the mesa, then climb to a 2,900-foot notch called The Saddle. From here, hike southeast another 4.5 miles, and set up camp near the middle of the mesa.

Season September to May

Permit Required for backcountry camping (\$10)

Info nps.gov/bibe



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[BACKPACKER.COM/
BIGBEND](http://BACKPACKER.COM/BIGBEND).

Mariscal Canyon Rim is one of the most spectacular places in the park, Parent says. It's a 3.3-mile hike from the Talley trailhead on River Road.

WEEKENDS

15

1 of 3

Nature's Zoo Blackwater River State Forest, Florida

Panther Creek is so still and dark that it acts as a mirror. Water oak limbs stretch out from sandy banks, framing my reflection. I accidentally startle a doe and she bounds into the forest through a patch of purple, yellow, and white wildflowers, reminding me I'm not alone. I'm working my way across General Andrew Jackson's Red Ground Trail on a 22-mile, three-day hike, and, despite the ideal 60°F March temps, I haven't seen another hiker all day—just whitetail deer, rodents, snakes, and bug-eating carnivorous plants. I'd shout for joy, but I don't want to disturb the locals.

BY VICTORIA STOPP



Turn-by-turn

From Karick Lake North Campground

1 Follow the blue-blazed General Andrew Jackson's Red Ground Trail 5 miles.

2 At mile 5, merge with the Florida National Scenic Trail and continue 16.5 miles to Red Rock Road. (Break at miles 8.8 and 15.1.)



Campsite 1

Peaden Bridge shelter (mile 8.8)

Take refuge in the nicest backcountry shelter in Blackwater. A firepit and

two picnic tables—plus flat ground for tenting—allow for groups of up to 10 (free; first-come, first-serve). Refill water at the river crossing at mile 8.2 en route.



Campsite 2

Old Martin shelter (mile 15.1)

Four scorched post anchors are all that's left of the shelter, but a picnic table and cleared ground big enough for four tents under the pines make this first-come, first-serve site worthy. Top up your water at the creek crossing at mile 13.1.



Animal house

Scan the canopy for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, as well as fox squirrels and great horned owls. Look for burrows in the sand, too—they house gopher tortoises and eastern indigo snakes (both threatened).

DO IT

Shuttle car

30.785203, -86.886492; 10 miles northwest of Holt on Red Rock Rd. (Option: Contact the Florida Trail's local chapter expert and trail angel, Peggy Grantham, at 850-982-9490.) **Trailhead** 30.895744, -86.640415; 29 miles northeast of the shuttle car on Karick Lake Lower Rd. **Gear up**

Hall's Hardware in Milton; hallshardware.com **Season** Year-round, but the best temps are in early spring (wear blaze orange). **Permits** \$2/person/day **Custom-centered map** bit.do/BP-mapJacksonTrl (\$15) **Contact** westerngate-fta.org **Trip data** backpacker.com/JacksonTrl

Trip stats

Distance:
21.8 miles
Time:
3 days
Difficulty:
★★★★

16

Bike an iconic ski trail.

→ Yes, cruising the American Birkebeiner Ski Trail in Cable, Wisconsin, on Nordic gear is a winter rite of passage. But here's a spring ritual to add to your calendar: For one day only—March 7—you can ride your fat bike on the snow-covered-but-groomed trail. In the Fat Bike Birkie race (20K and 47K options), riders pedal bicycles with wide rims and extra-large, grippy tires on the rolling, 30-foot-wide Nordic ski trail that links Cable to Hayward. There will be aid stations with water and energy drinks and gels throughout the race. Cash prizes will be awarded to the top three men and women. **Info** \$50-\$85 registration fee; birkie.com/bike/events/fat-bike-birkie



Find a local fat bike rental through eriksbikeshop.com or ridefatbikes.com.

No. 17 | See rare cactus in a newly opened Arizona desert.

→ When is a park not a park? When more than half of it is closed to the public. That's what happened to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in 2003, when

officials restricted access to the park's backcountry because of illegal cross-border activity. But last fall, the entire park was opened, thanks to increased staffing

and improved infrastructure. Reap the benefits on trails in Senita Basin, one of the best places in the U.S. to see native senita cacti and elephant trees. **Info** nps.gov/orpi

No.18
Circumnavigate Prescott on a new trail.

→ Be one of the first to hike the new Prescott Circle Trail in Arizona. The 52-mile loop, set for completion this month, meanders through forest, chaparral, and grasslands and along lakeshores on the full circuit. Or, pick a section near Watson or Willow Lakes for a dayhike. Find more trail, trailhead, and campsite information at yavapai-trails.org. And, for 20 more loops, turn to page 66.

No.19

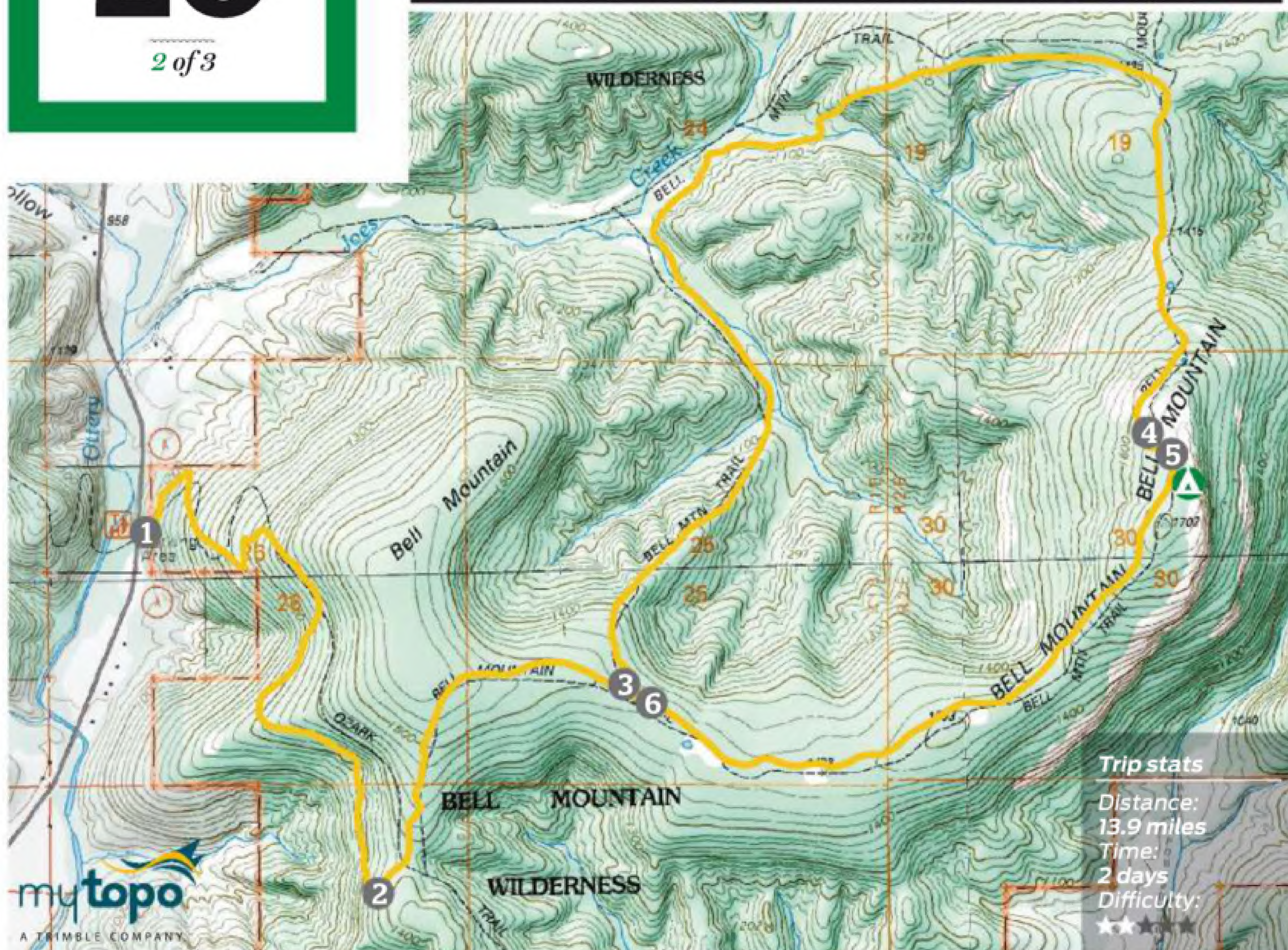


Don't miss the gray whale northward migration, which passes by NorCal's Point Reyes coast in March.

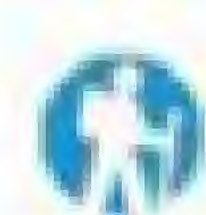


Three-season Wildflowers

Bell Mountain Wilderness, Missouri



You come around a bend and the smell hits your nostrils before your eyes catch up. In front of you, a kaleidoscopic blossom display of yellows and purples blankets the mountain slope—the perfect springtime hike. But you don't have to wait until May: Find showy wildflowers blooming three-quarters of the year on this Missouri hike.



Turn-by-turn
From the Ozark Trail Parking Area on Highway A

- 1 Follow the Ozark Trail 2.4 miles southeast up the western flank of Bell Mountain to a junction.
- 2 Veer north onto the Bell Mountain Trail (BMT) and continue 1.2 miles

- to where the BMT intersects itself.
- 3 Take the BMT 4.6 miles clockwise, crossing Joes Creek at miles 4.6, 5.3, and 6.1 (resupply water), to the summit of 1,702-foot Bell Mountain at mile 8.1.
 - 4 Veer .3 mile east via a faint footpath to a clearing.
 - 5 Continue south off the summit; reconnect with the

trail and follow it 2.4 miles to the BMT intersection.

- 6 Retrace your steps 3.6 miles to the trailhead.



Campsite
Bell Mountain (mile 8.4)

Your front porch never looked so good: Set up camp on Bell Mountain overlooking 1,662-foot Lindsey Mountain and the wildflower-laden gorge below. There's a clearing big enough for a half-dozen tents (first-come, first-serve) just feet from the steep drop off the

eastern face. Since there's no water source on the summit, make sure to fill up at Joes Creek.



Three-season wildflowers

Bell Mountain's springtime bloom show includes snow-white dogwoods and purple redbuds (peaking mid-April through May). If you can't make the peak, though, be sure to visit in summer for late-blooming yellow Missouri primrose and autumn for even-later-blooming purple asters.

DO IT
Trailhead
37.625618, -90.911264, 36 miles southwest of Park Hills on State Hwy A.
Gear up ORCC Gear in Fenton; orccgear.com
Season Spring for wildflowers and fall for foliage (either for ideal temps); avoid summer's humidity and winter's snow. **Permits** Self-issue (free) at the trailhead. **Custom-centered map** bit.do/BP-mapBellMtn (\$15)
Contact fs.usda.gov/detailfull/mtnf/ **Trip data** backpacker.com/BellMtn



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No. 21

Smell like your favorite wilderness.

→ Two options: Skip the post-hike shower (cheap), or use a dash of the new Juniper Ridge Backpacker Cologne (risky, if you have a significant other, as scents include pine sap, driftwood, and salt air). We didn't make this up. Info \$60/1-oz. bottle; bit.do/Juniper-RidgeCologne



No. 22
Money does buy happiness! Public grants and private fundraising raised more than \$7 million to preserve West Virginia's Cheat Canyon. Celebrate by hiking the newly re-opened, 7-mile section of the Allegheny Trail that runs through it.



Endless spring Juniper Dunes, Washington

→ The canine footprints are the closest thing to a trail I've seen all day, so I follow them. While the high country remains under a blanket of snow, this desert oasis is carpeted with brightly blooming wildflowers—which is why I'm tackling a 14.4-mile loop in this mostly trail-free wilderness in March. Crisp spring air surges into my lungs as I trace the coyote's path over grass-topped sand dunes and through thickets of silvery sagebrush. The coyote tracks plunge into a grove of gnarled western juniper, one of the last stands in the Pacific Northwest, and I follow. A startled great horned owl takes flight as I arrive. Finally, I catch a glimpse of my quarry: a lone coyote perched high on a sandy ridge, his lithe form silhouetted against the golden light of the fading sun. As he trots out of sight below the horizon, I wonder what else I'll discover in this hidden kingdom of sun and sand. BY PAUL CHISHOLM



Turn-by-turn

From the Juniper Road parking turnout

- 1 Follow the sandy OHV road north for .5 mile.
- 2 Just before the road passes beneath powerlines, make a right onto a lesser-defined OHV road and follow it .9 mile west to the wilderness boundary.
- 3 Continue north on the OHV road, paralleling the wilderness boundary, until you reach a gate at mile 2.6.
- 4 Cross into the wilderness and navigate 3.6 miles northeast (off-trail) to a large dune with expansive northward views at 46.416773, -118.837523.
- 5 Make your way east and south to

loop 5.2 miles back to the wilderness boundary at mile 11.4 (46.387290, -118.887820)

- 6 Retrace your steps 3 miles to your car.



Campsite
Juniper grove (mile 9.3)

Pitch your tent in the largest juniper grove in the wilderness near 46.391677, -118.845315; it should be around mile 9.3 if you follow the writer's route. There are no established camps, but the surrounding trees will protect your site from the strong winds that often blast the Juniper Dunes. Pack plenty of water; there are no sources within the wilderness.

As the sun sets, climb to the nearby ridgetop and watch the dunes light up with day's last rays.



Choose your own adventure

There are no paths in the Juniper Dunes Wilderness, but numerous game trails crisscross the area, and the land is open and easily navigable, meaning limitless potential for custom trips. Most of the juniper trees are in the central portion of the wilderness, while the largest

Trip stats

Distance:
14.4 miles
Time:
2 days
Difficulty:
★★★★★

dunes are in its northern reaches. Novice hikers wary of navigation challenges may still see many of the area's scenic highlights by walking along the boundary fence on the west side of the wilderness.



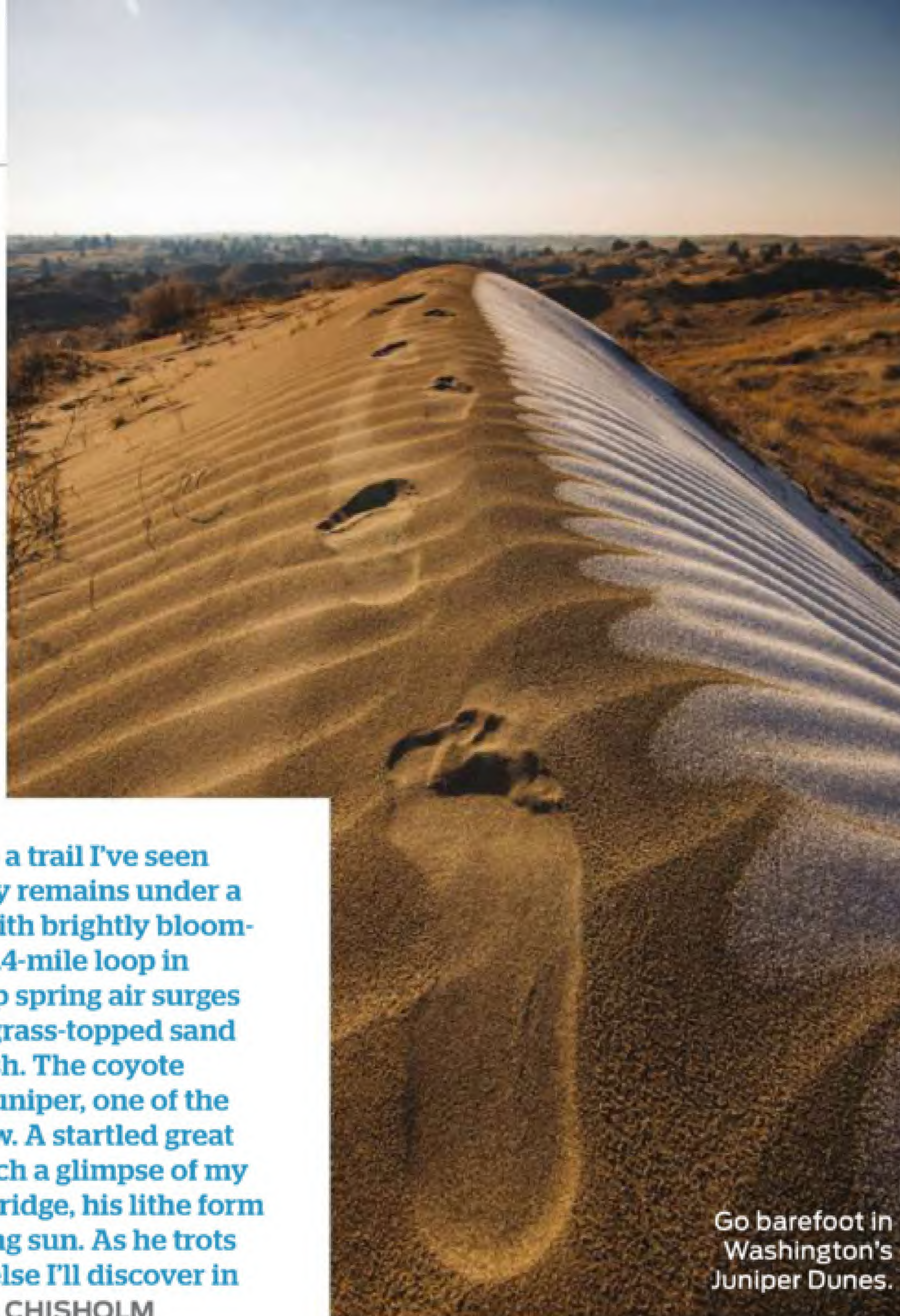
A desert gem

The Juniper Dunes are home to a number of rare and endemic plant species such as gray cryptantha, which only grows on actively moving sand dunes in the inland Northwest. Look for this low-growing perennial forb in loose, unconsolidated sand on southwest-facing dune slopes; it has a fuzzy gray stem and white, quarter-size,

daisy-like flowers, which bloom in late spring.

DO IT

Trailhead Varies with road conditions. There is a parking area with a kiosk (46.360928, -118.904305; 17 miles northeast of Pasco on Juniper Rd.), though soft sand may require visitors to park farther away. **Gear** up REI in Kennewick; rei.com **Season** Year-round, though spring brings blooming foliage. **Permits** Required for overnight stays (free) through the Spokane BLM **Custom-centered map** bit.do/JuniperDunes (\$15) **Contact** bit.do/BLMjuniper **Trip data** backpacker.com/JuniperDunes



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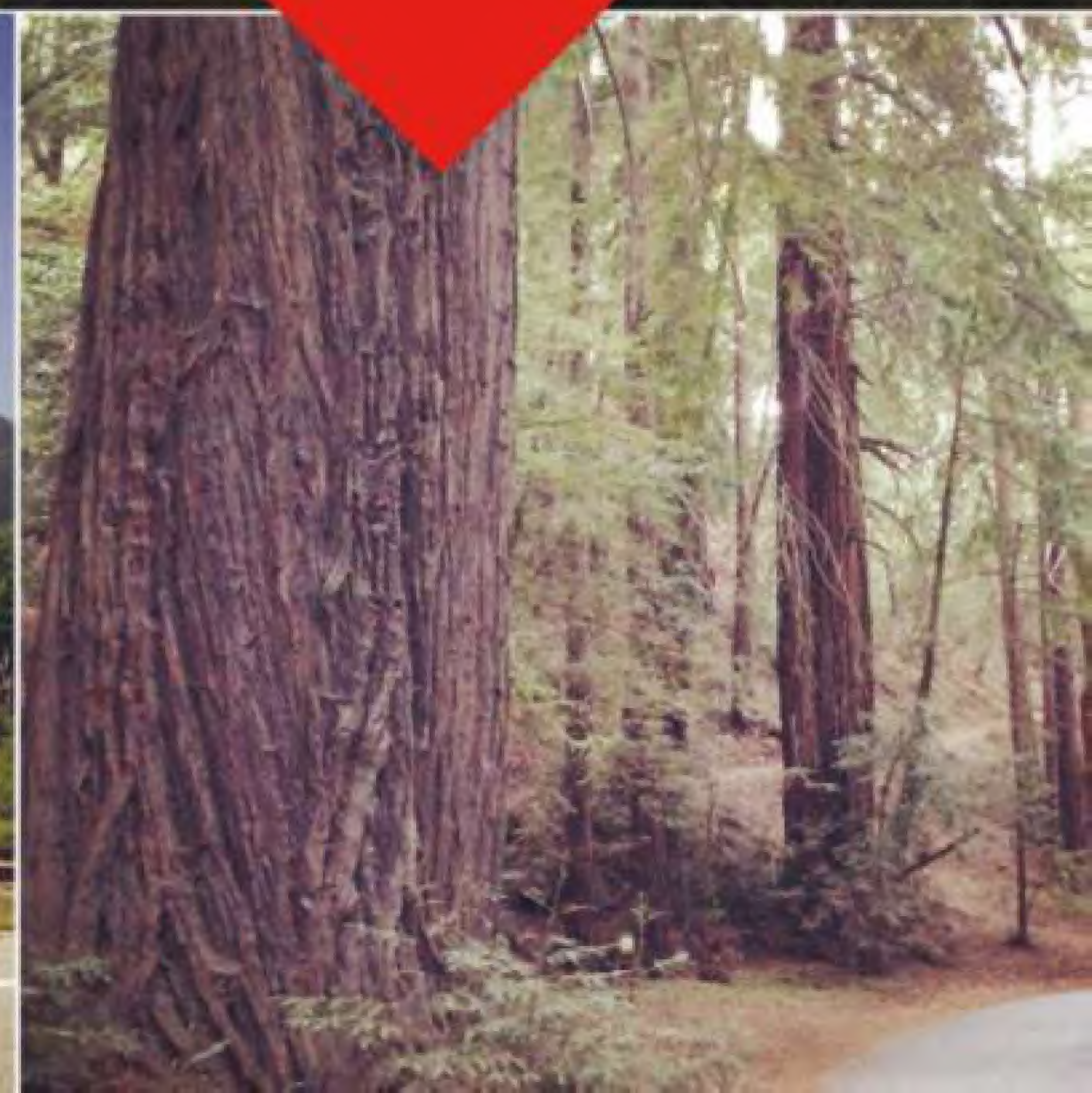
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- Mt. Hood
- Everest Base Camp
- Kilimanjaro
- Mt. Whitney
- Aconcagua
- Grand Teton
- Mt. Shasta
- Design a Custom Climb

*photo courtesy of Eddie Bauer/Jake Norton



Skills

Spring Trail Running

Don't let mud season slow you down. Ultrarunner Jerry Armstrong shares his tips for staying out no matter the weather.

1) Forget about avoiding puddles and mud; it's futile (and bad for trails), so just plow on through. **2)** In the wettest conditions, use the same running shoes as usual, but add a pair of waterproof/breathable Rocky Gore-Tex socks (\$70; rockyboots.com) with a lightweight pair of socks underneath. On rainy, all-day adventures, use foot powder (like Gold Bond) and trade wet socks for dry ones every three hours or so, as your feet will likely get sweaty. **3)** Ankle gaiters will keep out muck and snow; in icy conditions, carry a pair of Kahtoola Nanospikes (\$50; kahtoola.com) and put them on when you need better traction. **4)** Adapt your kit to the conditions. In cold weather, wear compression calf sleeves above the socks. Mittens that convert into fingerless gloves offer the best combination of warmth and on-demand dexterity. Add a hat, ear warmers, and layers as needed, but you should be chilly at the start. You'll warm up fast. **5)** In frigid temps, wear your jacket over your running pack to keep snacks and water from freezing (or stow them close to your torso). **6)** Post-run: Clean shoes, remove insoles, and stuff shoes with newspaper to speed drying.



RICH WHEATER

Making tracks on Mt. Seymour in North Vancouver, British Columbia

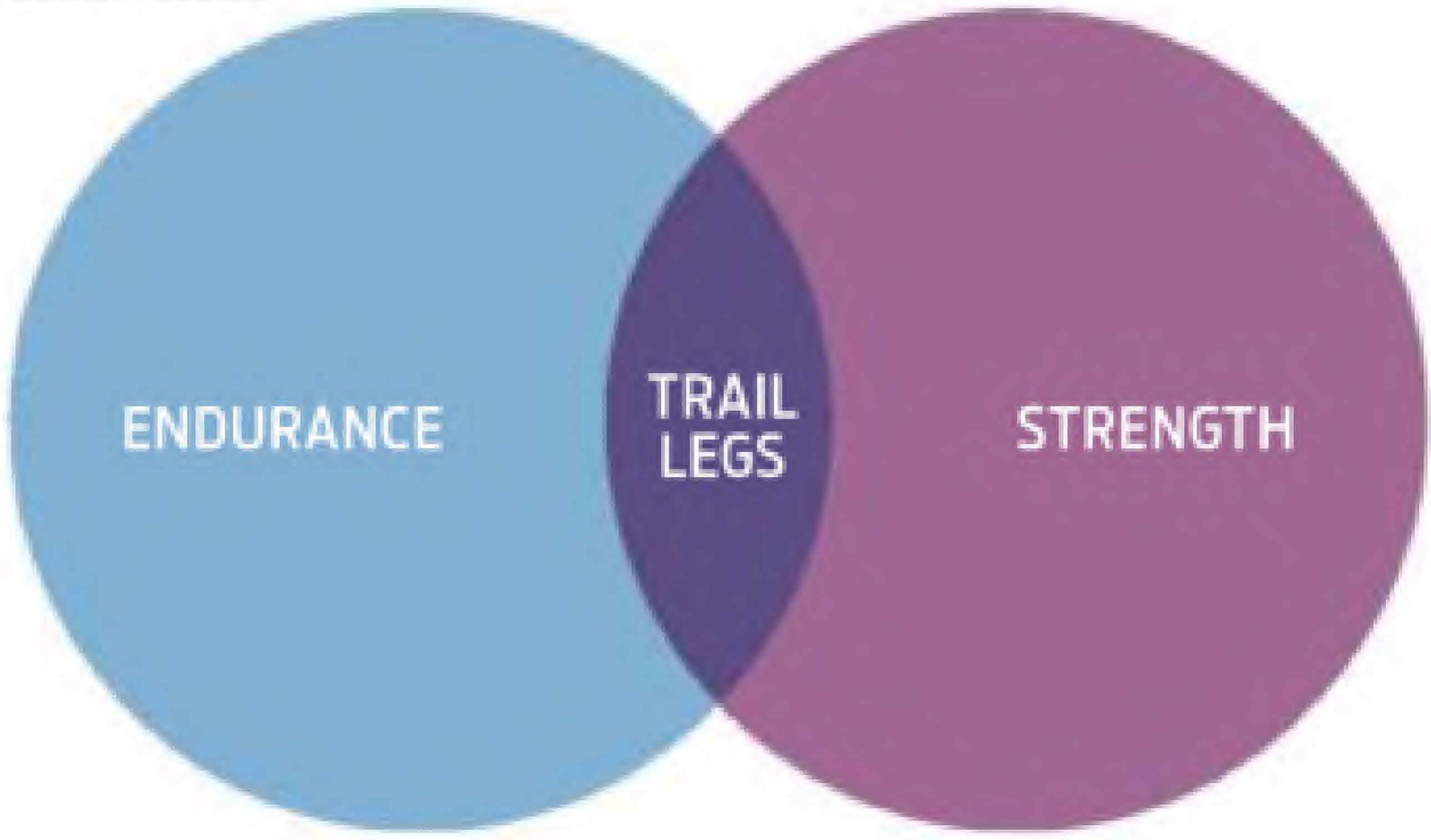


cheat sheet

Pre-season Training

Doughy is a lifestyle choice. Make a different one: Start training, stop complaining, and yadda yadda yadda, you're a trail-eating beast. You'll thank us later when you're flexing a rippling quad while pointing some outdoorsy looker toward the trailhead.

The Goal



Excellent Exercise That Everyone Hates
"SANDBAG GET-UPS. WITHOUT A DOUBT," SMOTHERMON SAYS.

If You Do Nothing Else

CRUNCHES, SQUATS, LUNGES, STEP-UPS, PUSH-UPS

Weight a pack (20 lbs. to start) and step onto a park bench 16 to 18 inches high. Add 5 pounds a week until you're at 40 lbs. Add to workout three times a week until you can do 700 steps in less than 30 minutes.



THE EXPERT
Jordan Smothermon, head coach at StrongSwift-Durable in Jackson, WY
"We understand that mountain athletes put their bodies on the line," he says, explaining his coaching philosophy. And you'll never hear him ask what you bench. "The way to test our fitness is: If the weather changes, can we get down or out quickly and safely?" That's the true measure of mountain fitness.

It's hard. It's supposed to be.
Smothermon: Pacing is key here.

Suffer in silence.

One rep at a time.

GOOD JOB.
Smothermon: Good job means 'good enough.' That's not the goal.

5 Helpful Things to Say to Someone Who's Working Out (AND 1 UNHELPFUL ONE)

Keep going. More of that.

THE MOUNTAIN DOESN'T CARE.

What's the Word

Chronic Adaptation

n. The way your body meets the challenge of cumulative exercise, i.e. getting stronger and more beast-like.

The One Thing You're Doing Wrong

MAKING SO MUCH DAMN NOISE.

ATHLETES SOMETIMES EXPRESS EMOTION BY YELLING OR GRUNTING. THAT CAN BE DETRIMENTAL TO THEIR PERFORMANCE. IF THEY'RE GRUNTING, THEY'RE THINKING, *THIS IS HARD, HOW AM I GOING TO MAKE IT?* THEY'RE ALREADY LOSING THE MENTAL GAME.

Three Second-Level Strength Exercises

1. Lunges



Hold equal weights in both hands (pro tip: buckets of nails look tough). From a standing position, step forward until both legs are bent at 90 degrees. Push up, bringing rear foot forward. Repeat with the other leg.

Poor Man's Leg Curl



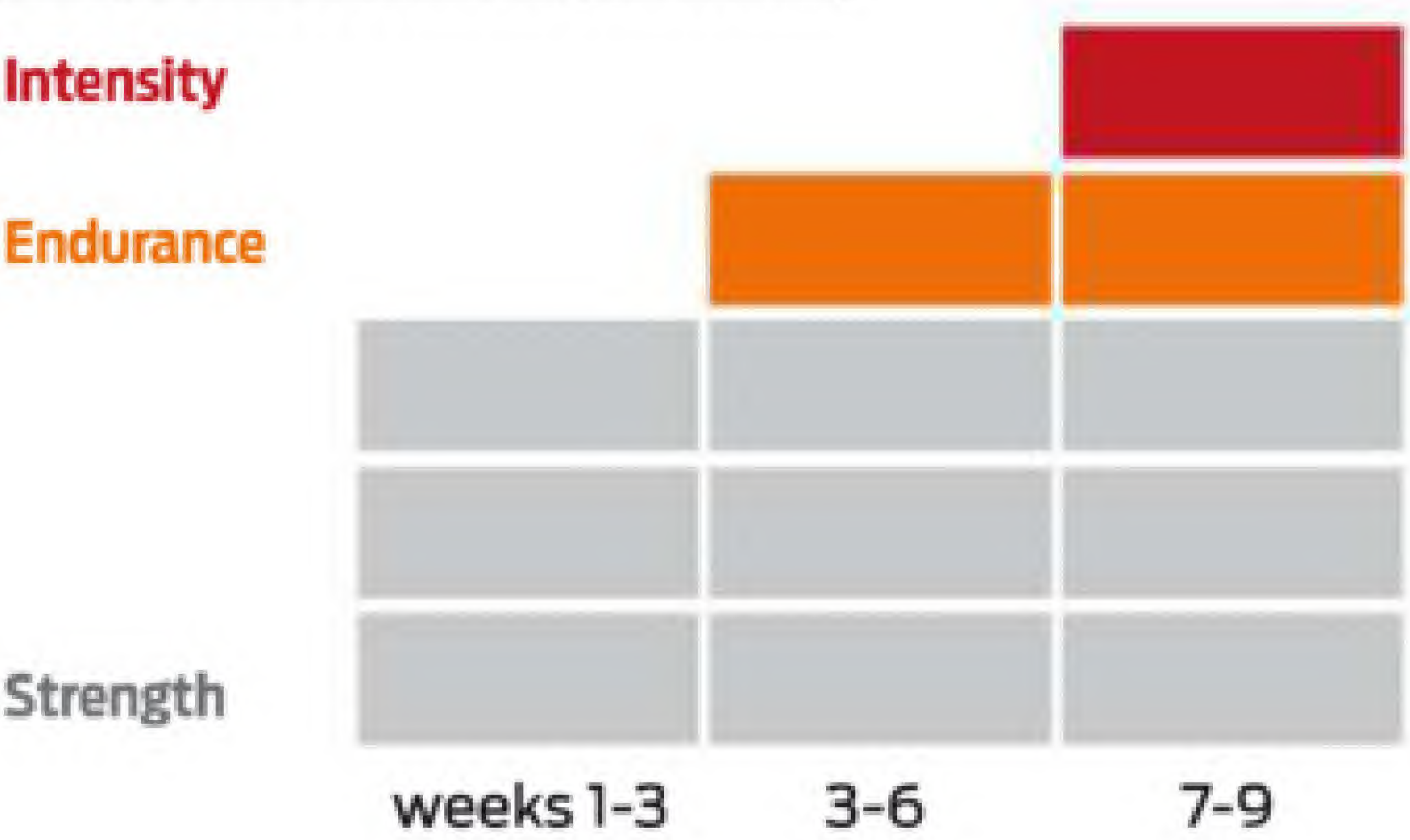
Lay flat on the floor and scoot your hips toward an elevated bench. Place your left foot on the bench. Lift your right leg up as high as you can bear. Press lefty down into the bench, clench your glutes and hammies, and raise your hips off the ground. Do 10, then repeat for other leg.

Band Walks



Tie a resistance band around your legs, mid-shin, so there's tension while you stand with legs at hip-width. Stand straight, tuck abs, put hands on hips, and walk forward while maintaining the band's tension between your shins.

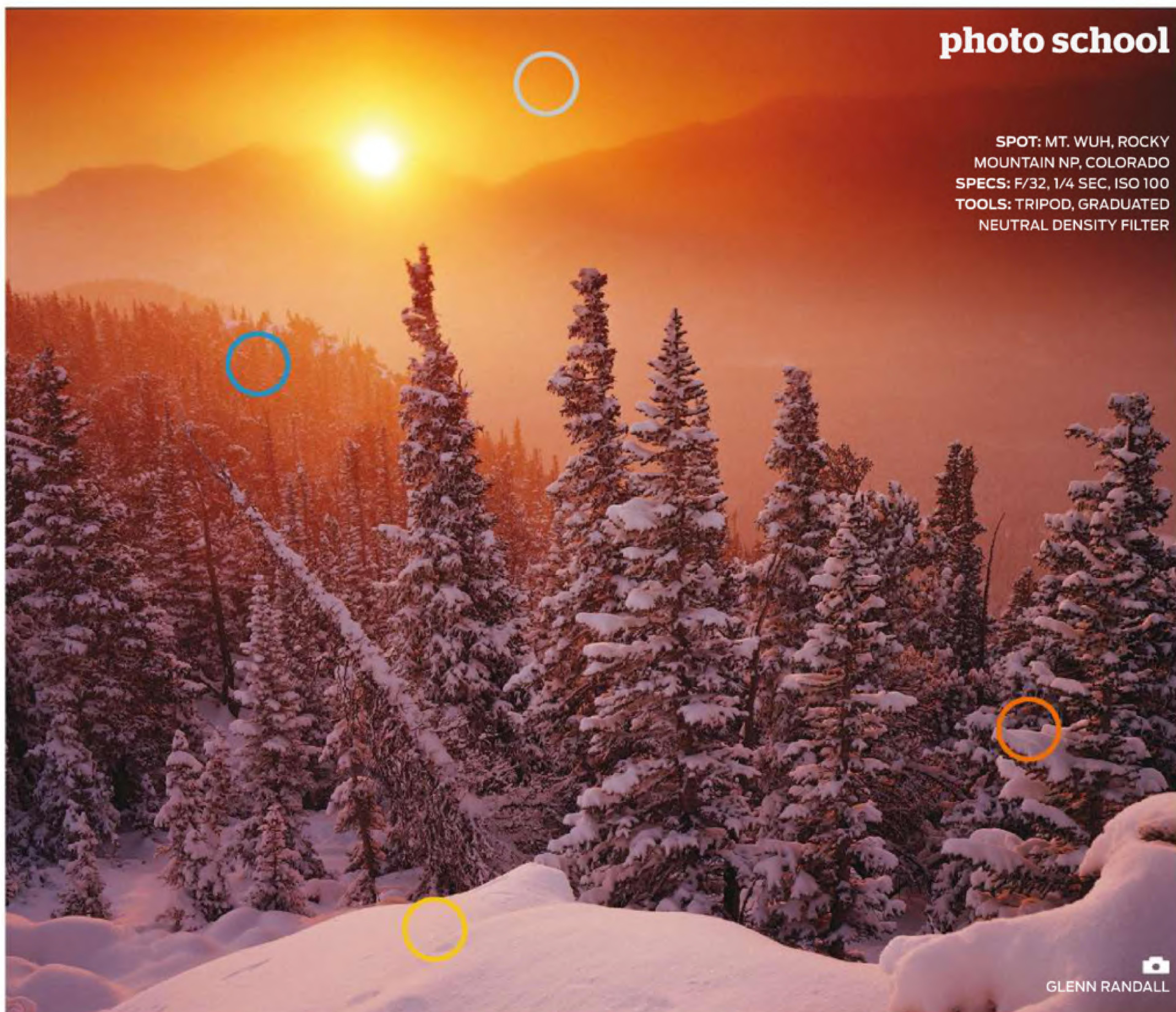
Early-Season Training Calendar



Strength → 3 days per week, 1 hour/session. "Put on strength now and you'll have muscle that you can later sacrifice to build up your endurance." Keep rest periods to a minute or two: "No time to flex in front of the mirror." Endurance → 1 day per week for 45 minutes at moderate intensity (e.g. jogging, hiking) Intensity → Increase weekly endurance workouts to 1.5 to 2 hours, and add 1 day of high intensity exercise with high output but less weight (e.g. speed hiking).

photo school

SPOT: MT. WUH, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NP, COLORADO
SPECS: F/32, 1/4 SEC, ISO 100
TOOLS: TRIPOD, GRADUATED NEUTRAL DENSITY FILTER



GLENN RANDALL

Snow Scene

Under a blanket of white, even familiar views can turn otherworldly. Here's how to bring that fleeting beauty home. By Photo Editor Genny Fullerton



TIME IT RIGHT

Heavy snowfall paired with windless conditions will produce the most dramatic snow in the trees. But even a single set of footprints can interrupt the scene's calm, so head out soon after a storm or target a less popular place, and don't be afraid to step off-trail in search of a pristine tableau.



FRAME UP

Be strategic so your scene draws the eye in. Rather than shooting at a solid wall of trees, which blocks the background, find a spot where there's a gap that allows the eye to continue deeper into the photo. If possible, include something of interest in the background as well, like a peak or cool clouds.



EXPOSE BETTER

Snow confuses a camera's exposure settings. If your camera has a snow or beach mode, use it to keep the snow from appearing gray. Otherwise, to keep the photo from being too dark, overexpose by at least two-thirds of a stop (see below), taking care not to blow out the brightest part of the scene.

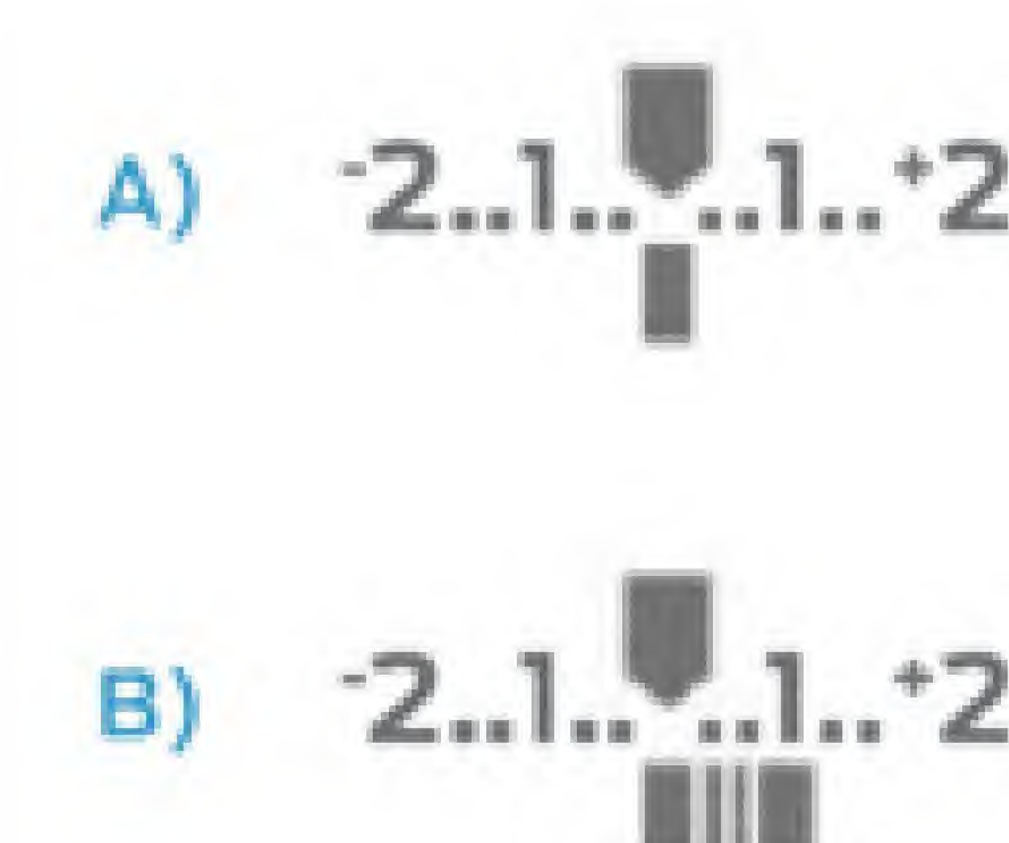


CAPTURE COLOR

Winter scenes sometimes look great in black and white, but shoot near sunrise or sunset to capture bright oranges, reds, or pinks reflecting off the snow. Make sure the camera's auto white balance doesn't neutralize the colors. Adjust the white balance to daylight or a sunset/sunrise setting.



EXPOSURE COMPENSATION Your camera expects the lights and darks in a scene to average out to 18 percent gray. In most situations, that's fine. But when a scene has a lot more light than normal—like when the usually dark ground is covered in a blanket of white—you need to choose an exposure that lets in more light. In manual mode, watch your light meter as you open up the aperture, lengthen the shutter speed, or increase the ISO. It will look like (A) when the camera thinks the exposure is right. A proper exposure in snow will look more like (B).



pass/fail



THE CHALLENGE

Leave the Trail

Can a novice navigator make the leap to confident cross-country hiker? By Maren Horjus

WHEN RYAN and I were dating, I was all too happy to let him be in charge of the map. Cliché as it sounds, I would have been lost without him—especially when we ventured off-trail. But now that we're married, my priorities have changed. I decided it was time to fill the glaring hole in my outdoor résumé and learn how to navigate without the benefit of trail signs and well-worn paths—or a guide. It

was time to take the lead.

For my maiden voyage, I chose a five-peak traverse in the 12,000-foot Kenosha Mountains, which rise out of Colorado's Lost Creek Wilderness like a fist's knuckles. Perfect for a beginner like me, the route followed "handrails," or easy-to-see features, the whole time. After an initial 1,800-foot climb over 2 miles paralleling a creek, Ryan and I would hit treeline, and then we'd tag the five summits on the east-southeast ridge before dropping down to the Colorado Trail and closing the loop to the car. Since the Colorado Trail traced the flanks of the peaks, all we'd have to do to bail was hike south downhill until we intersected it. All in all, 12 miles, the first two-thirds of which would be off-trail.

On a clear October day, we located the trailhead and bypassed the Colorado Trail in

search of the unnamed creek we'd follow to treeline. The map showed only one blue line near the trailhead, and it tailed out between the second and third peaks of the row. I found it hidden beneath grabby, shoulder-height willows and quickly realized mistake number one: Shorts are a bad choice for off-trail hiking.

I folded the topo so it showed our current position and orientation from the perspective we were seeing. As we ascended past the lowlands, a huge, crumbling massif rose to our left; I matched it to the group of crowded contour lines I saw to the left of the creek on the topo—and realized that after almost an hour of hiking we'd traveled less than a mile. While Ryan and I typically hike at around 3 mph, the underbrush and deadfall were slowing us down considerably. By the time we hit the ridge, two hours had

already lapsed; at this rate, the whole route would take us more than 12 hours.

Studying the topo, I determined that we should nix the two northern peaks, which would have added a 6-mile (round-trip) spur onto our loop. Then we got moving. Above treeline, cross-country travel was easy and fast. I pinpointed each peak with ease, and we cruised across the grassy alpine slopes before determining which line we'd follow up the 200- to 400-foot scree slopes to the summits. The route seemed obvious, thanks to the prominent peaks, but I occasionally verified our southeast bearing on a compass.

I insisted upon taking a selfie atop the last peak as evidence of my success before down-climbing to timberline. We just needed to head down and we'd eventually intercept the Colorado Trail. Shortly after we dove



Read a Topo Map Plan your route and track progress on a good map. A 7.5-minute topo, on which 1 inch represents 2,000 feet, affords the best terrain detail. (A GPS is great, but you should always have a map and know how to use it.) Introduce yourself to off-trail travel with mellow terrain and short distances and branch out as map skills improve. Get map and compass tips at backpacker.com/navigation.

back into the mixed pine and aspen woods, I found a game trail. We followed it, although it didn't head straight downhill. Instead, it cut across the slope, descending west. This wasn't part of the original itinerary, but I relished the fluidity of a true off-trail hike—you adapt to the terrain as you go, becoming much more in tune with the conditions than when casually following a trail. Before long, the game trail led us to a willow-shrouded creek. I matched our location against the topo, determining we'd hit the unnamed creek between the fourth and fifth peaks. Continuing downhill, I felt confident we were on the right route.

And then I heard it before I felt it: the squelch of thick, brownie-batter mud enveloping my boot. Ahead of us lay a 100-yard expanse of knee-deep sludge. "Check the map," Ryan advised. I dragged my finger down the creek toward the Colorado Trail and then my heart sank. The topo was clear: A white blob

filled with blue cattails—a huge marsh—sat between our position and the trail. I had the direction right, but hadn't checked the map for obstacles. "My bad," I said sheepishly. We high-stepped through the mud and eventually hit the Colorado Trail, on a raised wooden boardwalk above the muck.

Consider the gap in my outdoor résumé filled. And bolstered with a little mud.

THE VERDICT

PASS

But there's room for improvement. Next time, I'll take into account slow travel speed and on-map marshes, but I set myself up for success with a great route that followed easy-to-identify terrain. And I learned the rewards of off-trail hiking go way beyond simply getting from A to B.

STAY ON COURSE

Use these tips to navigate successfully and avoid off-trail obstacles.

► **Plan smart.** Remember that the shortest line between two points isn't always the best route. Traveling farther on easy terrain is often faster than cutting through thick brush or hauling a heavy pack up a steep slope.

► **Be realistic about distance:** Five miles or less per day is a good bet in rough terrain.

► **Follow a hand-rail.** Identify a linear feature like a stream or ridge on your map. Use it to

avoid getting off course.

► **Once you're in the field, refine your planned route by scouting the terrain you actually encounter.** Look around from a vantage point and double-check your decisions about which side of a valley to descend, where to enter the brush, and which line to take across a slope.

► **Navigate around obstacles.** Blow-down, marsh, or cliff in your way? To get around the problem without losing your route, use your compass to sight a prominent object (like a tall

tree, distinct rock formation, or peak) that is beyond the obstacle and lies on your original bearing. Travel to that object by the easiest path, then continue hiking on your intended bearing.

► **Save energy by navigating hillsides along one elevation instead of going up and down.**

► **Know when to bail:** The consequences of running into trouble can be more severe off-trail. Seriously reconsider your plans if you encounter hazards you're unprepared for or if dangerous weather threatens.

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Photo/Andrew Maguire



Ground spices go stale after about six months; buy from the bulk aisle to get only as much as you need.

The Spice is Right

Quick-and-easy trail food doesn't have to be bland. Mix up some flavor-packed spice blends at home to kick your cooking to a new level of yum.

By Jennifer Bowen

Cincinnati Chili

This Buckeye favorite has rich mole flavors without being especially hot. It's thinner than normal chili, and usually served over hot dogs or spaghetti. 2 servings

SPICE BLEND

(premix these at home in a baggie)

- 1 Tbsp chili powder
- 2 tsp granulated onion

- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- 1/2 tsp garlic powder
- 1/4 tsp cumin
- 1/4 tsp cinnamon
- pinches of ground allspice, coriander, and clove

MAIN INGREDIENTS

- 4 oz. spaghetti noodles, broken in half (note cooking time)
- 2 oz. chopped steak-style jerky (1/4" pieces)

- 1 oz. packet Lipton Cup-A-Soup Tomato
- 13 oz. cooked kidney beans
- 1/3 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 sugar packet
- 1 Tbsp cooking oil
- 1 tsp vinegar (any will do, but we like cider or rice)
- salt & pepper
- cayenne (to taste)

ON THE TRAIL → At least three hours before you'll prepare the chili, add jerky to a bottle with enough water to cover. Seal and keep in a cool area like your pack or bear can.

IN CAMP → Bring large pot of water to boil and cook pasta according to directions; drain and set aside. Add oil and spice mixture to a second pot. Heat over a low flame, stirring continuously until spices are aromatic (less than a minute), then add jerky (include liquid), soup packet, vinegar, sugar, and beans. Bring to a simmer and cook, stirring frequently, until chili is fully heated. Add salt, pepper, cayenne, and additional water to taste. Divide pasta between two bowls. Top with chili and cheese.

Yellow Coconut Curry with Cashews and Raisins

People are always impressed with this authentic-tasting Indian dish. Don't tell 'em how easy it is. *2-3 servings*

SPICE BLEND

- 2 tsp yellow curry powder
- 1 tsp granulated onion
- 3 Tbsp butter

MAIN INGREDIENTS

- 2 Tbsp raisins
- 1/3 cup toasted cashews
- 1/2 cup freeze-dried peas
- 5.5 oz. can coconut milk or 3 Tbsp dried coconut cream (mix with 2/3 cup water in camp)
- 1 tsp rice wine vinegar
- 1 sugar packet

- 5 oz. bag boil-in-bag basmati rice

AT HOME → Combine curry powder, onion, and butter in a small plastic container. Combine cashews, raisins, and peas in small zip-top baggie.

IN CAMP → Cook rice according to package directions; set aside and keep covered. Add curry mixture to medium pot. Heat over a low flame, stirring constantly until butter is melted and spices are aromatic. Add cashew/raisin/pea mixture and stir to coat. Add 3/4 cup water and cook over medium heat until peas are soft and liquid simmers (about 5 to 7 minutes), then stir in coconut milk, vinegar, and sugar. Continue cooking until mixture is hot and thickens to a creamy consistency, like alfredo sauce. Serve over rice.

Toasted Chipotle-Cumin Quinoa Wrap

Toasting spices is a time-honored way to guarantee an even bigger flavor burst. Bonus: Hearty quinoa is a complete protein. *2 servings*

SPICE BLEND

- 1 tsp cumin
- 1/8 tsp chipotle powder
- 2 tsp granulated onion
- 1/4 tsp garlic powder

MAIN INGREDIENTS

- 1 avocado
- 2 gourmet tortillas (like spinach flavor)
- generous handful underripe grape tomatoes
- 1 small lime
- 1 Tbsp cooking oil
- 8 oz. packet precooked quinoa
- dried or fresh cilantro
- salt & pepper

AT HOME → Lay tortillas on a piece of plastic wrap large enough to extend 5 inches on both ends; fold one end over the wraps and roll tightly like a fruit roll. Wrap avocado and

tomatoes in paper towels, then in a small brown bag; pack in a pot.

IN CAMP → Halve avocado and slice inside skin. Cut lime in half. Cut tomatoes into halves. Add oil and spices to a pan and heat over a low flame, stirring continuously until spices are toasted and aromatic. Remove from heat and add quinoa and a splash of water (to keep pan from drying out on the bottom). Heat quinoa, stirring continuously until warm. Add tomatoes, cilantro, and salt and pepper to taste. Divide avocado between wraps, add quinoa, squeeze lime over each, and roll like a burrito.

Mexican Scrambled Brownie

Those instructions on the brownie box? Feel free to ignore them. This simple technique will get you a gooey, chocolatey dessert in just a few minutes. *2 servings*

SPICE BLEND

- 1/4 tsp cinnamon
- pinches of ground cloves and cayenne

MAIN INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup brownie mix
- 1 Tbsp oil
- 2 Tbsp toasted chopped almonds

IN CAMP → Pour brownie mix and spices into a nonstick pan; slowly stir in water until you get a batter that's thin enough to easily pour off your spoon. Stir in oil. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until batter gets thick and fudgy and starts to pull away from the sides of the pan. Fold in almonds. Eat with a spoon.



Get more easy backcountry recipes at backpacker.com/trailchef. Got food questions? Email trailchef@backpacker.com.



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Photo Christian Burris

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Survival



Adam Herman, 24, and Conor Lodge, 22, were caught in an avalanche in Tuckerman Ravine on New Hampshire's Mt. Washington on December 28, 2013.

As told to Peter Rugg

out alive:
avalanche

"I was in the air. All I could see was empty, cool whiteness no matter how long I turned in the air or which way the snow and the ice ground me up."



BENJAMIN ROSSER

out alive

THE PLAN WENT BAD AT THE FORK IN THE TRAIL. ¶ IT HAD BEEN ONE HOUR SINCE CONOR AND I HAD SEEN TRISTAN OR RICH THROUGH THE BLUR OF WHITE THAT HAD WHIPPED UP AS WE STARTED HIKING DOWN MT. WASHINGTON. WE SPLIT INTO GROUPS SO EACH PAIR COULD GO AT ITS OWN PACE. CONOR AND I WERE AHEAD AND PLANNED TO WAIT FOR THEM AT THE JUNCTION. WE WERE ALL EXPERIENCED CLIMBERS, BUT EITHER WE WERE MOVING FASTER THAN WE'D GUESSED OR THEY WERE MOVING SLOWER. MAYBE BOTH. IN A FEW MINUTES, THE SWEAT ON OUR SKIN STARTED TO ICE. IF WE STAYED STILL, IT WOULDN'T BE LONG BEFORE FROSTBITE SET IN.

We waited as long as we could, maybe 15 minutes, but no figures appeared through the snow. So we turned to the trail, and, being more sure of our shivering than of our direction, went right at the fork, and hurried along to warm up.

Then I felt the ground flatten beneath me.

It was one of those seismic shifts that drives your stomach into your throat and triggers something primal in your brain. And I knew, very suddenly and very clearly, that I had walked onto the lip of a dangerously loaded snowfield and now we were in an avalanche. I tried to spike an ice pick into the ravine to anchor myself, but found no purchase—it was much too late for that.

Then I was in the air. All I could see was empty, cool whiteness no matter how long I turned in the air or which way the snow and the ice ground me up.

Then the white went dark, along with the rest of the world.

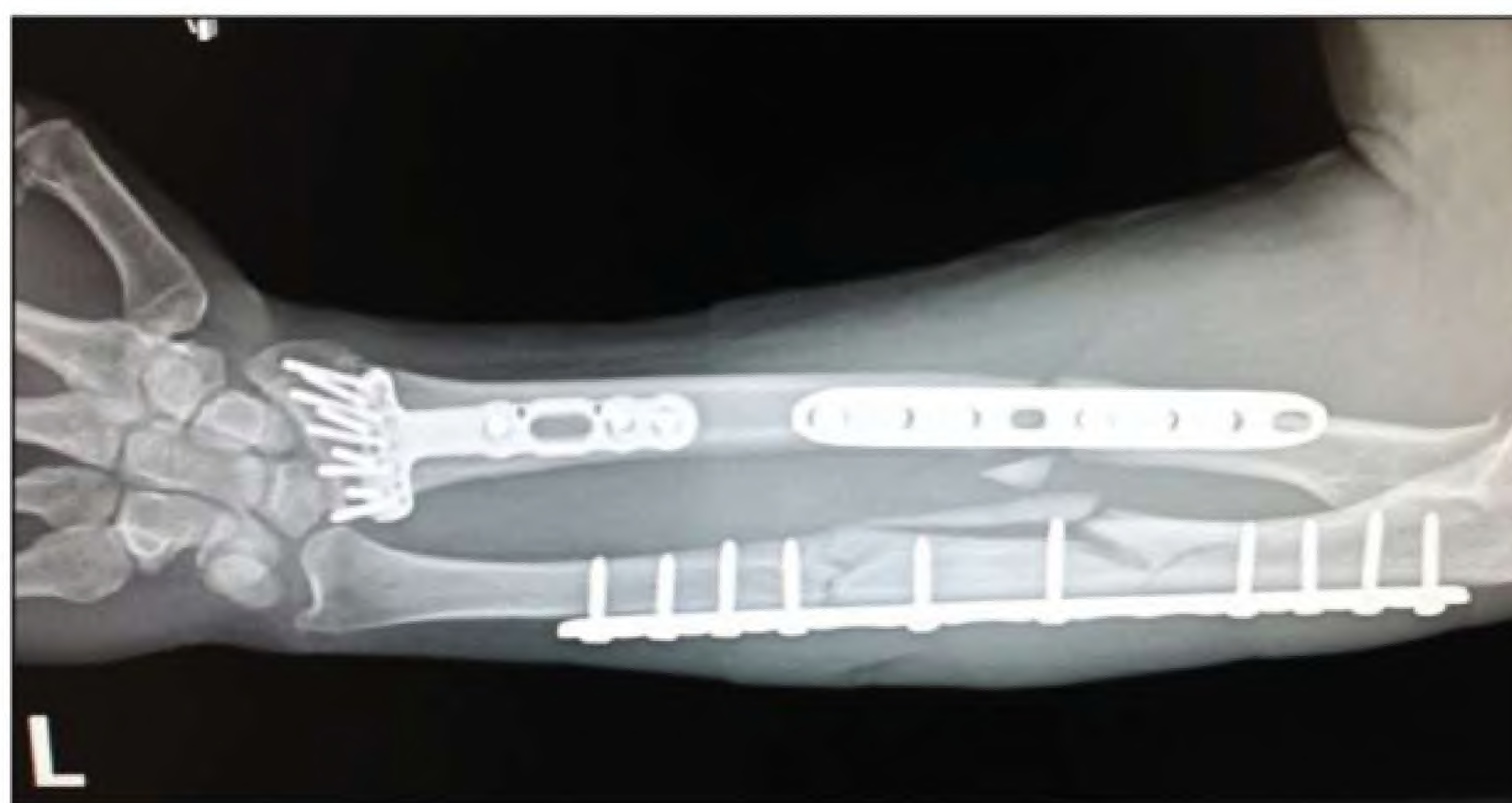
THE FOUR OF US grew up together in Oak Bluffs, on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, but now we'd been scattered by college and work. Back home for the holidays, we planned the trip to the White Mountains. Tristan and I were new to this peak, but Conor and Rich had both summited it a few times in winter. In their experience, they'd said, the path up the Tuckerman Ravine Trail from Hermit Lake was simple.

It was. Even for a first-timer, the hike was straightforward. I snapped a picture of the Forest Service's warning sign about avalanches. One more shot to remember the trip by, but not relevant to us: Our ascent was by a different route, and the posted avy danger was low for the day.

Conor and I traveled quickly over the well-trodden snow. Our packs were light with just layers, water, and some food. But Tristan and Rich were loaded down with overnight gear (they planned to stay and hike a few days), so their progress was slower. Early in the hike, we decided to split up so that Conor and I could tag the summit and make it back before dark.

By 2:30 p.m., Conor and I reached the summit, and stayed a while to snap pictures. Before we even started back down, the snowfall had set in and we knew it would be better if we were out before the sun set. On the way back down, we crossed paths with Rich and Tristan again. They turned around and we made plans to meet at the fork in the trail, staying in our separate groups.

I WOKE UP ON TOP OF THE SNOW. I thought maybe things weren't so bad. Initially, I'd thought I was going to



die or be buried, but I only had a broken arm. The rest of my body hurt, but I still couldn't tell how badly—the adrenaline was pumping hard. I tried to sit up and blood started oozing down across my face. I decided it was better to lie back down.

It was like lying in a room with white walls and a white ceiling, and there was no sign of Conor. I could see my boot sticking out of the snow, knocked clean off by the force of the impact.

I lay there for maybe 15 minutes, weighing my options and trying to stay calm. Then, the crunch of snow under boots brought me back. There was Conor, well enough to walk, climbing down to me. When the ground collapsed under us, his leg had caught on a rock and he must've landed on a higher ledge.

As he came closer I could see his face, a cluster of purple bruises. He considered me for a moment, blood dripping from his forehead down to his jacket.

"Who are you?" he asked.

I told him that we were good friends who'd been climbing this mountain all day, and that we'd been in an avalanche. I spent six summers working as a lifeguard and I knew a concussion when I saw one. I also knew that as long as we didn't fall asleep out here in the snow any time soon, he was likely to be fine, if a little frustrating to deal with.

As for my own condition, between the arm that I was sure was broken and the stab I felt in my back, I knew I was hurt badly, but not beyond repair. There was a voice, very soft, in the back of my brain, telling me that I couldn't really tell how bad I'd been hurt, that maybe no one would find us, that if I was so right about the "low avy danger" I wouldn't be down here to begin with. Conor and I did what we could: We consolidated our water and food and waited.

It wasn't long before I could hear Tristan's voice cutting through the wind. It was the best sound I'd heard in my life. "We're getting help!" he promised from somewhere up in the white. "Hang in there!" Not that we had a choice.

You learn a few things about yourself in these situations. For one, you find out whether you're a pessimist. Conor, whether from head wound or natural disposition, gave up. He talked about how he couldn't believe this was the end and the

Adam Herman's left arm after reconstructive surgery

key
skills

things he'd done in his life and what he thought might come next. He thought death might be an improvement, spiritually speaking.

"I'm at peace with dying," he told me.

I love Conor, and I knew that this was the knock on his head talking, but this wasn't any good. "I'm saying this for you as much as me," I answered. "Please shut up."

It's odd to say, but once I knew help was on the way, it was very boring being down there in the snow and ice. I thought about the next hike I'd take, how long it would be before this broken arm healed, how I was going to tell this story the first time a girl asked about the cast. But I knew I wasn't going to end like this, spooning with Conor.

Five hours after our fall, I saw the lights of the approaching snowcat. I can't remember now if I was laughing as they slid me onto the backboard, but if I wasn't it seems like I should have been.

When they got us to the hospital, the doctors confirmed I had broken not just my arm, but my back. Conor sustained a massive concussion. They estimated we'd fallen more than 800 feet, skidding off patches of rocks and snow and ice.

It was pure luck that Tristan and Rich found us. When they reached the split in the trail and found it empty, they had no way to know we'd taken a wrong turn. Tristan just had a hunch, and lucky for us, he listened to it.

Survive an Avalanche

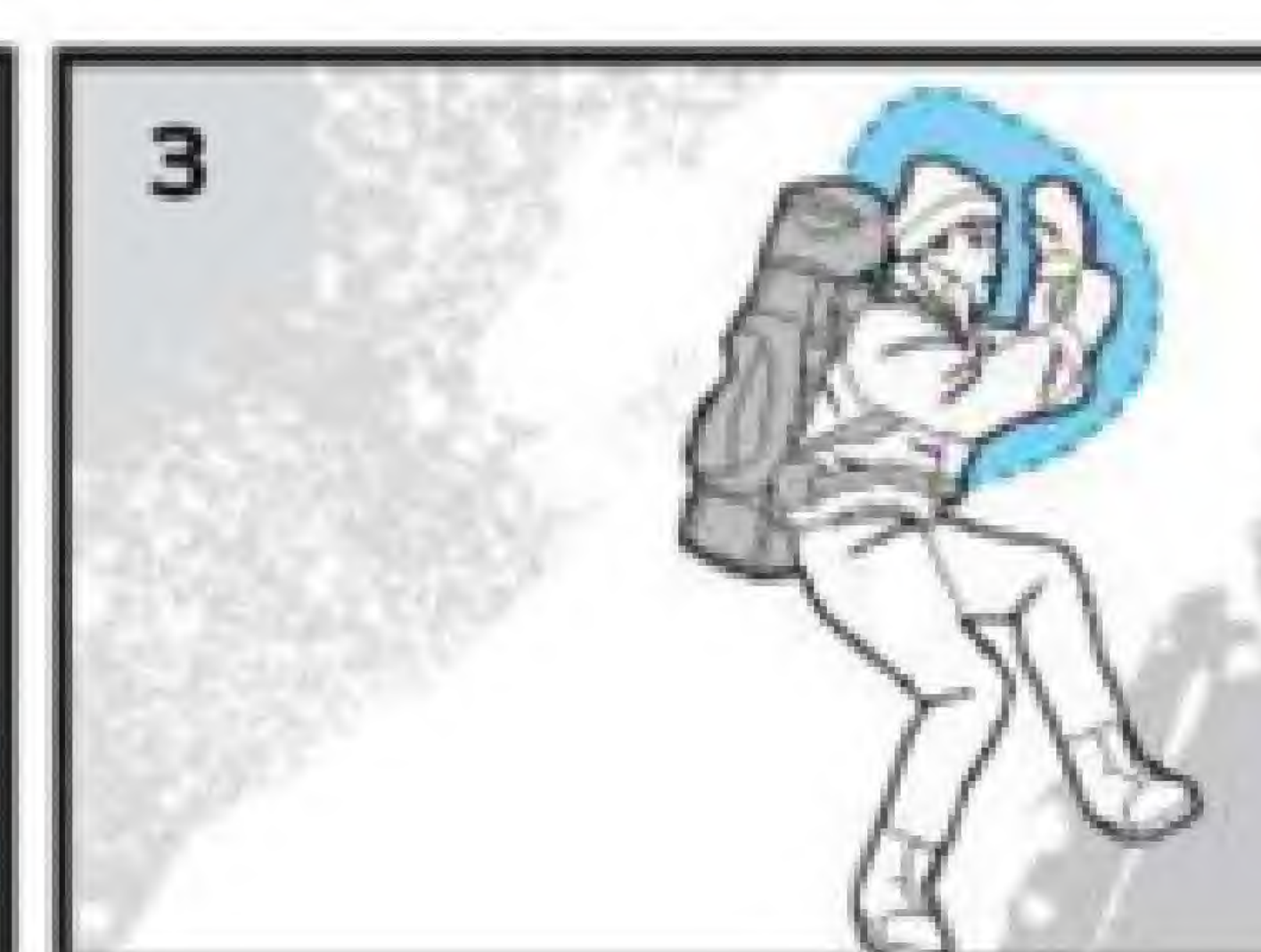
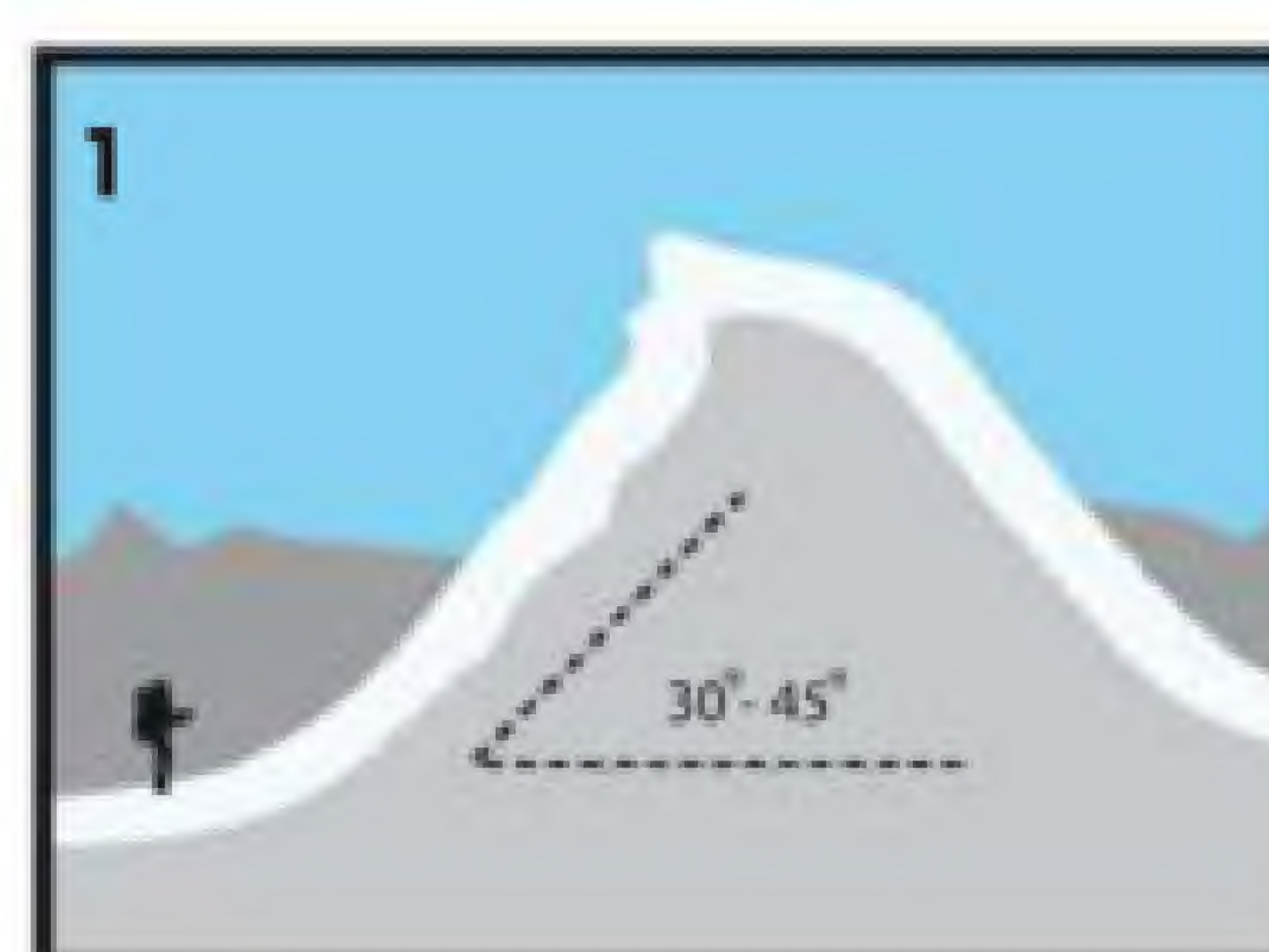
Safety starts with prevention. Avoid terrain sloped between 30 and 45 degrees (1), as well as gullies and ravines. Better bet? Get prepared by taking an Avalanche Level I class near you. But, if you are caught in a slide, you should know how to minimize the danger of being buried. Memorize these tips from Richard Riquelme, a certified guide and avalanche instructor with the American Alpine Institute in Washington. —*Josette Deschambeault*

2. If you're caught, "swim" to safety.

Assume the whitewater position: feet downhill and in a sitting position to absorb shocks of obstacles. Ditch poles, ice axes, or skis, and use your hands and arms in a swimming motion to move toward the surface and stay there.

3. Prep an air pocket.

When the avalanche slows down, get your palms up by your forehead, elbows out, and start creating a cocoon around your face. Take a deep breath and hold it—the more your lungs can expand, the better. When the avalanche stops, you'll have more space to breathe in the pocket you created. Space is time, and time increases the odds of rescuers finding you before it's too late.



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Wild Animals

So much “new” technology is modeled after things found in nature (bomber wings, solar cells, etc.). Harness natural solutions for survival, and you might do well enough to live like a bushman.

By Jason Schwartz,
Rocky Mountain Bushcraft

MIGRATORY BIRDS

Geese and other species fly north each spring and south come fall. Take note of multiple flocks' prevailing direction of travel and use it to establish a rough north/south bearing.

FISH

Eat them, obviously. But then save the skins and use them to make glue for basic repairs, or to hold together a water vessel. Scrape off the scales, dump the skin in a pot, and add just enough water to cover. Boil until it's a sticky syrup. Note: It takes a while to set.

ANTLERS

The primary purpose of antlers (fighting!) makes them stronger than bone. Use them as flint-knapping tools.

TRACKS

Hoofstock (deer, bighorns, mountain goats, and such) usually converge near water sources.

SMALL MAMMALS

After you trap or club one and roast the lean meat, harvest the sinew. Remove the long ligaments found along the spine, let them dry thoroughly in the sun, and then pound them on a smooth rock (being careful not to cut them) until they're soft. Wet and braid sinew and use it to string a bow, make snares, or tie on arrow fletching.



A cautionary word about carcasses: These things are backcountry buffets for bears and other scary predators, many of which will aggressively defend their dinner. Use caution. If you do find a dead animal, don't eat the meat unless it's stink- and maggot-free (if it's yucky, use it for bait). Starving? You can sometimes find good enough meat by cutting away the nasty stuff. Just make sure you cook the heck out of it.

DEAD BIRDS

Pluck long tail feathers, split them, and affix to your primitive arrows using pine pitch (sap boiled and mixed with charcoal) or fish-skin glue. Secure them in place with paracord strands, sinew, or thread. Fletching makes arrows fly straight and true.

BONES

Even if an animal's flesh is picked clean, the bones can still hold fat- and protein-dense marrow. Look for long bones, and access marrow with a rock. No marrow, no problem: Use the shards for scrapers, needles, arrow-heads, or blades.



Urine Trouble

Can pee save you? Our new survival expert sets the record straight.

I'm hiking in 90°F weather, halfway through a three-day, waterless trip. I accidentally spill the rest of my water. But my bladder's full. Is there any way to make my urine drinkable? Filtering? Boiling? Or is it always going to be undrinkable?

-Angela Schmidt via Facebook

→What exactly do you mean by "undrinkable"? Kids in the UK have been known to sip their pee after watching Bear Grylls do the same on TV, with no lasting ill effects beyond their parents being very, very disturbed.

But that only works if you're well-hydrated, and that's not what you're talking about here. Despite what you saw on TV, pee is even more full of salts and minerals than seawater, and drinking it will suck the life out of you faster than a

bayou full of leeches. And a regular backpacking filter will do you no good. Your only hope is to evaporate the water out of the urine, then collect it.

Pee in a large container, apply heat, catch and condense the vapor, and funnel that clean water into a second container. Now, you've got two options. If you have a stove or a campfire, tinkle in your cookpot, put a cup inside (on a flat rock), cover the whole thing with your lid inverted so the handle points into the cup, and boil away.

Or build a solar still: Dig a hole about a foot deep, then add urine and any greenery you can find. Stand a cup in the center. Spread plastic over the opening, pull taut, seal the edges using rocks and dirt. Use a stone to weight the sheet over the cup so the water drips into it.

The stove is faster; the

still might help you get extra water out of the soil. Both will only get you a small fraction of what you put in. Either way, the water will still taste like pee. So there's some justice in the world after all.

When you've run out of water is it better to hold your pee or let it flow?

-Kyle Lintern via Facebook

→Sitting around thirsty and needing to pee seems double dumb to me, but I asked Dr. Paul S. Auerbach, a wilderness medicine expert for his say on the matter. "Water that sits in the bladder has already been discarded by the body and will not be reabsorbed," he says. See that? Always listen to your mother.

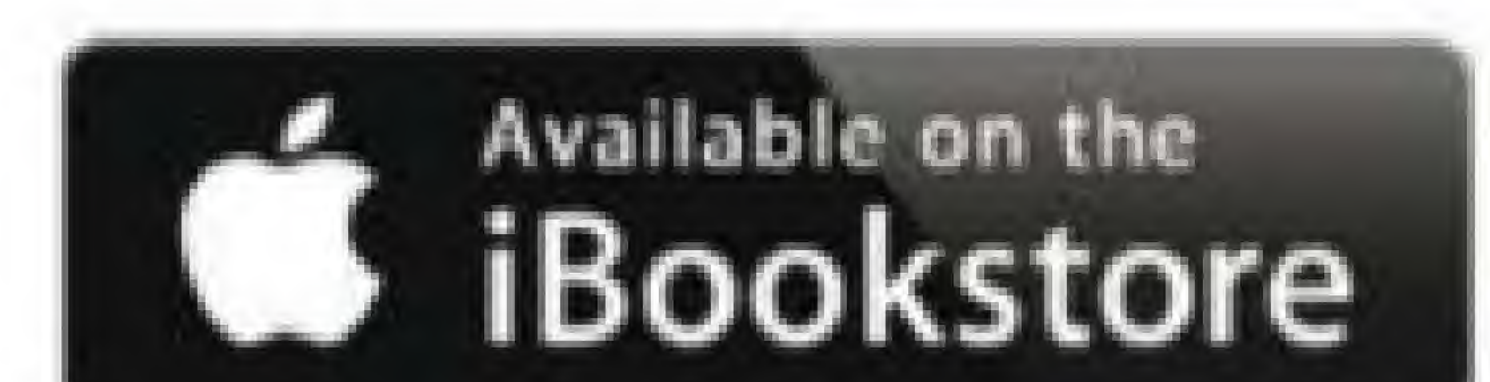
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DIAGNOSED WITH
CANCER THIS YEAR.**

Children are our greatest hope for the future. Let's be their greatest hope too.

Cancer strikes infants and children. For teens and young adults, survival can depend on treatment by a pediatric oncologist, designed specifically for them.

The St. Baldrick's Foundation and Stand Up To Cancer are funding groundbreaking collaborative research to bring the most effective therapies to kids fighting cancer. To learn how you can help keep these kids in play, go to stbaldricks.org/inplay and standup2cancer.org/pediatrics.

Julia Hernandez
Diagnosed at 16,
in remission.

Samuel L. Jackson
Stand Up To Cancer and
St. Baldrick's Ambassador



**St. Baldrick's
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Conquer Childhood Cancers



St. Baldrick's Foundation is a charitable 501(c)(3) organization funding childhood cancer research. Stand Up To Cancer is a program of the Entertainment Industry Foundation, a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

gear

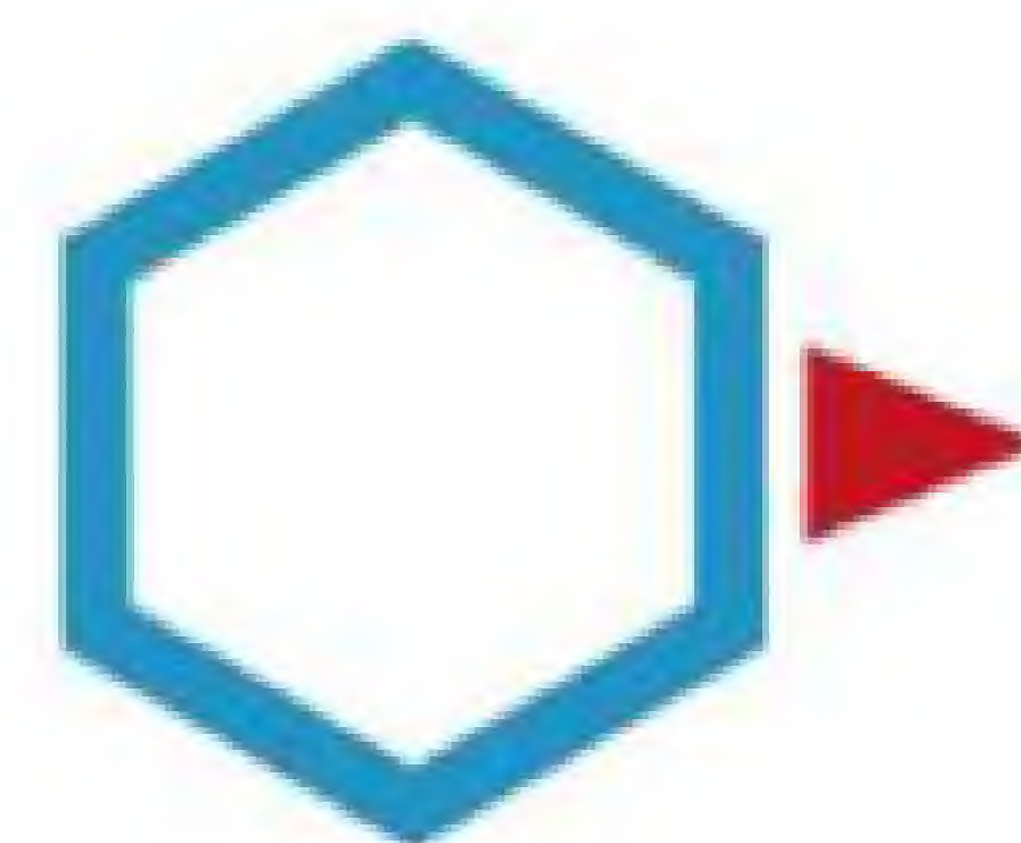
Native Wool:
Colorado-based
Voormi makes
apparel with wool
sourced from Rocky
Mountain sheep.
See the process on
page 53.



Homegrown

Gear

**American-made
equipment makes
a comeback.**
By Kelly Bastone



Look at the label on the shirt you're wearing. Or the boots on your feet. Or the tent, pack, and bag in your closet. Odds are, they were made overseas. No surprise, right? Manufacturing started chasing cheap labor decades ago. But the odds are changing. A recent resurgence in American-made gear has reversed the migration of factory work. From high-performance wool to ultradurable backpacks, more and more outdoor products are made in the U.S. Here's why you can expect the trend to continue—plus a few choice picks to look for if you want a trail kit as local as your tomatoes.

made in the USA



You'd need about 70,000 frenzied Seahawks fans to equal the energy of one thundering stomp of the mattress press at Cascade Designs, located amid a sprawl of flat-roofed warehouses south of Seattle's CenturyLink Stadium. You feel the three-story-high press in your gut, not your ears. Nearby, steam irons bigger than city buses gasp and sigh as they meld swaths of fabric into Therm-a-Rest NeoAir sleeping pads. Next up: snowshoes, camping stoves, trekking poles, and hydration reservoirs, all made right here.



1) A Mystery Ranch sewer works on a pack at the Bozeman, Montana, headquarters. 2) Wool for Duckworth apparel is sheared and sorted in Dillon, Montana. 3) MSR stoves undergo burn testing before final packaging at the company's Seattle facility. 4) A Chaco employee in Rockford, Michigan, trims the outsole on a custom sandal.



Just a few years ago, Cascade Designs looked like a holdout from the bygone era of American manufacturing. Now, it's surfing a groundswell. From boutique apparel brands like Voormi and Duckworth to established footwear giants such as Chaco and KEEN, an increasing number of outdoor companies are choosing domestic, rather than foreign, manufacturing. Even behemoths like The North Face are dabbling in homegrown and U.S.A.-made: This winter TNF debuted the Backyard Hoodie, which turns a heritage strain of California-grown cotton into a plush, American-made sweatshirt. They join brands such as Ford Motor

Company, which onshored 8,100 jobs in 2012 and pledged to hit 12,000 this year. In fact, more than a third of large U.S. manufacturing companies plan to return some production to the U.S., according to a recent study by the Boston Consulting Group.

Why have outdoor brands embraced the stateside migration? Changing buying habits, for starters. Local is the new buzzword, and many companies are betting that if you care about where your apples are grown, you'll care about where your jacket is sewn. Indeed, Cascade Designs intends to make the most of its Seattle heritage by relocating its "Made in the U.S.A." labeling to the front of



the packaging. (Federal Trade Commission guidelines dictate that the "Made in the U.S.A." label only applies when a product is "all or virtually all" made here—including labor and parts. Other claims, like "American Built," aren't as strictly regulated, and generally mean that only a portion of the product is sourced or made domestically.)

"Just 10 years ago, buyers didn't care where their stuff came from," says Chip Coe, Chaco's general manager. "But Millennials are very aware of the origin of goods." Chaco quickly sold out of its "From the Vault" line of Michigan-made sandals priced at \$125 (compared to \$100 for Asian-made versions).

"We've proven that consumers are willing to pay a bit more for U.S. goods, provided they're of good quality," Coe says.

That's exactly how apparel startup Duckworth plans to succeed. "The new luxury is to understand where your product comes from," says Duckworth founder Robert Bernthal, who sources the Rambouillet wool for his company's base-layers from a single Montana ranch.

But culture trends aren't the only factor driving the return of U.S. manufacturing. The era of cheap Asian labor is ending: Recently, Chinese labor costs have grown 15 to 20 percent each year. Trans-Pacific

shipping costs have become increasingly expensive. And political instability can also threaten production—witness the May 2014 riots in Vietnam, during which 20,000 protestors stormed factories in Binh Duong. The effect on gear companies was tangential, but the protest revealed how vulnerable foreign factories can be to social and political upheavals.

Politics plays a role on this side of the water as well, thanks to the 1941 Berry Amendment. It obligates U.S. armed forces to equip troops with American-made gear. Brands such as Outdoor Research, Mystery Ranch, and Gerber maintain domestic production to

made in the USA

The Goods

These U.S.-built products earned our backcountry stamp of approval.

Danner Mountain Light II

Made in Portland, Oregon, using only American materials, this heavy-duty boot costs (and weighs) more than most in its category.



But the Gore-Tex-lined, full-grain leather is hike-forever tough, and the Vibram Kletterlift sole can easily be replaced, thanks to the Norwegian welt construction. Supportive yet comfortable, it's like stepping into a tank lined with velvet. \$310; 3 lbs. 14 oz.; danner.com

Tarptent Hogback 4-person tent

Stitched in Seattle using American materials (only a few toggles and YKK zippers are imported), Tarptents are among the very few

shelters still made in the U.S. Direct-to-consumer sales keep prices reasonable, and innovation is impressive: The four-person Hogback packs as small as a fireplace log, yet gives sub-6-footers plenty of floor space (51 square feet) and headroom (with a 49-inch peak height). \$399; 3 lbs. 14 oz.; tarptent.com

Fox River PEAK Series Forester/Cypress

Made in Osage, Iowa (where Fox River employs about 200 workers), the midweight

Forester (and women's Cypress) pampers feet. Thanks to a buttery-soft blend of Tencel, merino, and nylon, the springy cushion underfoot feels so good that the first few steps seem like a guilty pleasure. After a summer of hard use, the socks are still cushy. **Note:** Automated sock production makes this category one of the few with many options. Other domestically made brands include SmartWool, Wigwam, Farm to Feet, Darn Tough, Thorlo, point6, and FITS. \$19; 3 oz.; foxsox.com



Mystery Ranch Terraplane

Made with virtually indestructible 500-denier Cordura (which is U.S.-sourced, as are most other components on this Bozeman, Montana-made pack), the 85-liter Terraplane may be the last load-hauler you'll ever buy. The stout suspension (a stiff plastic framesheet reinforced by fiberglass rods and a telescoping sheet behind the shoulders) makes 75 pounds as comfortable as 75 pounds can feel. \$485; 7 lbs. 7 oz.; mysteryranch.com



serve military contracts, but civilians see benefits from these deals as well. OR's cut-and-sew facility in Seattle stitches sophisticated gloves for the Navy Seals and Army Rangers, and also serves as an R&D lab for consumer designs. "Even though consumer items are later produced offshore, we can work out the glitches in Seattle so that we know it's a viable product for mass production in our partner factories," says Jordan Wand, OR's vice president of product and marketing. And with an anticipated expansion to include footwear, the Berry Amendment may soon give U.S. manufacturing yet another shot in the arm.

But challenges remain. Few U.S. factories have kept pace with new construction techniques such as plastic injection and seam-welding. For now, high-tech ski boots and outdoor apparel will still be imported. Overseas manufacturers also developed unmatched expertise in specific categories. "Asia has a handful of factories that unquestionably produce the best tents in the world," says NEMO founder Cam Brensinger. "Should you try to make those same tents here, they'd be 70 percent as good and cost twice as much."

But the most significant bottleneck choking the growth of American manufacturing is the lack of skilled labor. Workers laid off in

The most significant bottleneck choking the growth of American manufacturing? The lack of skilled labor.

the 1980s and '90s either found other jobs or retired. "Talent for non-automated production is gone," says Chaco's Coe.

So how do brands tackle that challenge? Companies such as KEEN and Princeton Tec have established processes for redeveloping the labor force, assigning apprentices to work alongside masters before those workers retire and take their know-how with them. "Some

Western Mountaineering Alpinlite

"This is the gold standard for warmth-to-weight, quality materials and construction, and consistent pinnacle performance," we wrote when giving this bag our 2014 Editors' Choice Gold Award. Made in San Jose, California, using both domestic and imported materials, it's ultralight but ultrawarm, thanks to overlapping layers of 850-fill goose down and an unusually plump draft collar. \$540; 1 lb. 15 oz.; western-mountaineering.com

Duckworth Comet Loose Crew

"The warmest shirt I've ever worn," says one veteran tester after three seasons in this midweight crew. Double-layer construction (with polyester jersey next to skin and Rambouillet merino on the outside) traps a layer of insulating air in between and creates a pleasantly springy fabric. It wicks faster than all-wool shirts, making it a workhorse for hiking in sub-45°F temps. \$80; 12 oz.; m's S-XXL, w's XS-XL; duckworthco.com

MSR XGK-EX

Not only is the XGK stove versatile—it burns all liquid gases and canister fuel—but it's utterly reliable in both modes. In our tests, the XGK bested the boil times of every other multifuel stove and even beat some dedicated canister models (it's especially effective in cold temps). Switching modes requires two simple steps, and the XGK is field-repairable, making it our go-to stove for committing, high-altitude trips. \$160; 13 oz.; msrgear.com



For more reviews of U.S. made gear, go to backpacker.com/usgear.

From Sheep to Shelf

By staying in-country, Colorado apparel-maker Voormi is more agile than if it relied on overseas production: When a tester reported a saggy top after multiday wear, designers called the mill, ordered changes, and had new tops coming off the line in three weeks. Here's how the Access Pullover, conceived and tested in the San Juan Mountains that back up to Voormi headquarters, comes to market.

1. ROCKY MOUNTAIN WOOL

Post-shearing, a Denver lab analyzes wool core samples for quality factors.

Voormi acquires Rambouillet wool from regional ranchers whose sheep graze at 7,900 to 11,000 feet. Each sheep produces about 6 pounds of wool per year, enough to make eight Access Pullovers.

3. SUPERWASHING* & CARDING

A South Carolina facility polishes away the fibers' tiny barbs, then "cards" it, combing what starts like a bowl of tangled spaghetti into one direction (a "roving").

2. CLEANING

Raw wool ships to a Southeast washing facility that strips away dirt and lanolin (1 lb. of "greasy" wool makes ½ lb. of clean fibers).

4. COMBING

Fine-toothed combs remove the shortest fibers, which feel itchy. Most wool gets one combing; Voormi's gets 2 to 4 brushings for max softness.

5. SPINNING

Spinning plants twist spools of roving into yarn. The softest wool gets just a few twists; Voormi wool gets 20 or more.*

7. CONSTRUCTION

Fabric travels back out West, where it's cut and sewn into Access Pullovers using U.S.-made YKK zippers.

6. WEAVING & KNITTING

An East Coast plant interweaves Voormi's wool with nylon, creating its unique "surface hardened" fabric, which is tough and water-resistant.

8. SHIPPING

Finished garments come home to Pagosa Springs, Colorado, where they're warehoused and shipped to retailers and consumers across the U.S.

skills have died out in the broader manufacturing picture, so we maintain them here by creating our own talent pipeline," says George Chevalier, Princeton Tec's marketing manager. "Guys come in, start doing basic stuff, and eventually they pick up the skills needed to make or rework the molds we use in our manufacturing process."

But it's not clear if such efforts will work for all categories of gear. "How many teenagers do you know who want to grow up to be sewers?" asks NEMO's Brensinger. Instead, he says, Americans should pioneer labor-saving innovations like computer-controlled seam-welding. "Let's advance the technology and

be creative instead of going backward and onshoring jobs we've already proven weren't sustainable in this country."

In order to pay sustainable wages and maintain competitive pricing, stateside manufacturers must trim other expenses. Easton Mountain Products and Cascade Designs save money by making their own parts. Black Diamond prioritizes cheaper manufacturing methods: Making crampons from stainless steel (instead of aluminum) bypasses the need for paint or other surface treatments that add cost. Mystery Ranch sells direct to consumers, cutting out the middleman.

For the moment, at least, it appears these efforts are working. And the outdoor-industry jobs that are created—or preserved—come with a fringe benefit: the satisfaction of helping people do what they love. At Orvis, which builds its premium fly rods in Vermont (and just re-shored production of its hallmark CFO model reels last spring), a third of the "Thirty-Year-Plus Club" members hail from the factory floor. "I feel proud when I see someone—especially a child or first-time angler—using an Orvis rod that I built," says Brian LaRose, a 30-year veteran. "It's very rewarding knowing that something I helped create brings people so much joy." ■



The Iskut River meanders into Kinaskan Lake (left) in one of the more "civilized" stretches of the Sacred Headwaters region. Right: The area's aspen trees turn golden in late September.



055

so good



it hurts

deep in Canada's northern wilds,
our scout proves there's no joy like misery.

by Ted Alvarez
photography by Carr Clifton



a a stagnant bog the size of a football field blocks my way forward. I just scrambled shifting, fridge-size boulders and cut through hedge mazes trying to avoid it, but the terrain funneled me down to the water's edge. I need to get across. Then, somehow, the miles will contract, the insects will quiet, and the thickets will part like the Red Sea. If I can just get across, I'll make it to the hunting cabins at British Columbia's Bug Lake, 9 miles away, in time for pot roast tomorrow night. God, I hope they're making pot roast. ¶ Beneath the bog's surface, a rock sits under a thick coat of orange sediment. I'm thinking a Super Mario hop that would

You'll catch this aerial view of the roadless Klappan Range on the flight to the Spatsizi Plateau.

briefly submerge one foot in about 12 inches of water should get me to the grassy bank on the other side, where I can skirt the bog entirely. *One, two, three.* I jump.

My foot plunges through the “rock” and I sink to my navel in the glop. Adrenaline, chill, and fistfuls of grass propel me onto the bank, where I stand panting and dripping. The peaty funk is so foul I’ll probably have to burn these pants when I get back.

If I get back. This solo, off-trail trek through Spatsizi Plateau Wilderness Provincial Park—across the gnarliest country I’ve ever seen—is shaping up to be one of the worst ideas in a lifetime of questionable decisions. I’m jelly-legged, sunburnt, sweat-soaked, and mosquito-chewed. But I’m delirious enough to look on the bright side. “At least I cooled off,” I say aloud, though no one can hear me. The mosquitoes make a run at my tonsils.

I’m not necessarily what you’d call a man of prudence. It probably began in youth, when I spent far too many humid Texas weekends tangling with poisonous snakes. I’d take dares to put copperheads down my shirt and clean up on ice cream truck money. Later, I couldn’t sit for two weeks after an 88-foot cliff jump into a mountain pool blew out my swimsuit and left a bruise tattooed across my butt that looked like a bite from a toothless shark. A swollen Denali river nearly extinguished the family bloodline when I coaxed my brother and sister into crossing it on their maiden backpacking trip (sorry, Mom). The biggest fight I’ve had with my wife lately involved me trying to convince her that North Korea would be a lovely place to hike.

So when I heard about a place in northern B.C. so wild and remote it makes Alaska’s Gates of the Arctic look overcrowded, my first reaction was *Time for a solo trek!* Sure, it would be grueling, a little risky, and possibly painful in ways I hadn’t yet imagined. But it was also guaranteed to deliver the exact kind of experience I crave: that transcendental misery that blooms when I leave my comfort zone. Deprivation, terror, mental and physical anguish—these things elevate a run-of-the-mill backpacking trip into a life-long memory. Call it the alchemy of suffering: The rocks don’t change to gold, but I do.

Plenty of people have experienced this Type II fun (awful when it’s happening, wonderful to remember) by accident when their tent collapses in the night or a sudden storm descends on a summer trip. Few seek it out. But in my experience, I’ve always been rewarded for overreaching. A last-second October trip to the Wind Rivers a few years ago let my brother and I savor the Cirque of the Towers alone—all for the low, low price of some moderate hypothermia. And so my accidents are more like “accidents.” It’s not that I’m some kind of backcountry masochist, though: I just understand that if I make choices that make my stomach churn before I reach my destination, it means I’m about to learn something new about myself—or at least have a great story to tell. But I also know there’s a dark side to this approach: The chance that I won’t see where the envelope ends, that I’ll reach the point where hard is just, well, hard.

my latest proving ground is an area 240 miles east of Juneau that sports one two-lane paved road for an area bigger than Oregon. There are a dozen parks in the region, many bigger than U.S. states. Their snows feed three of the biggest salmon rivers in the world (the Stikine, the Skeena, and the Nass), collectively known as the Sacred Headwaters to the native Tahltan people who’ve hunted here since crossing the Bering Land Bridge. I’ve got my eye on Spatsizi Provincial Park, a fearsome bundle of peaks, rivers, lakes, and tundra more than twice the size of Yosemite. The park sometimes sees fewer than a dozen hikers in two whole seasons, but I won’t be alone: It’s home to 3,000 caribou, 2,500 moose, 900 mountain goats, 800 stone sheep (a subspecies of Dall sheep that lives nowhere else), unknown numbers of grizzlies and wolverines, and seven to nine packs of wolves. Spatsizi means “land of the red goat” in Tahltan, for the mountain goats that dye their coats red

from rolling in the oxidized dirt on cliff edges.

My plan: spend a week forging into the heart of it all, sampling all of its modes of travel. One enters the core of the park by plane, horse, and foot (in exponentially ascending levels of difficulty). My journey there involves a puddle-jumper flight to the charming alpine hamlet of Smithers, B.C., followed by a six-hour drive north to Tatogga Lake, followed by a floatplane into Spatsizi.

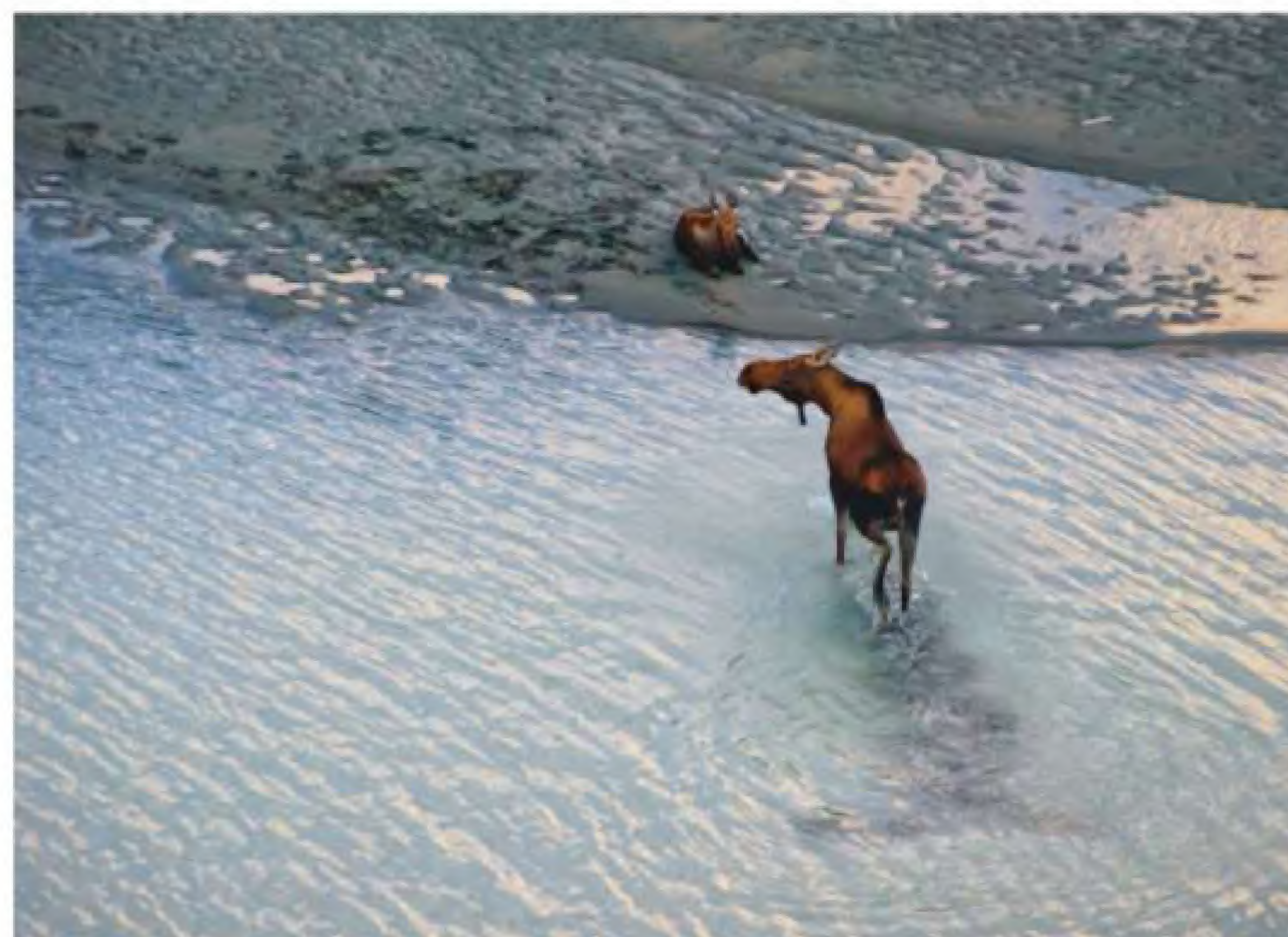
Then the real fun begins. I’ll start with one night riding with hunting guides on packhorses, and then head alone and on foot through 19 miles in the trail-less heart of the park. That includes the Gladys Lake Eco Reserve, a wild-as-it-gets zone forbidden to hunters and pack animals. Assuming I don’t die in a knife fight with a grizzly or get swept away by folly at river’s edge, I’ll end with a few more nights at a remote, park-maintained cabin on Cold Fish Lake before a floatplane pickup.

The logistics aren’t easy, so I enlisted the help of an outfitting service started here 45 years ago by two brothers, Reg and Ray Collingwood. I wonder if I should tell them I’ve never ridden a horse before.

Mick is a black stallion who doesn’t seem bothered by my nervous fidgeting. But except for being shaky, horsepacking isn’t quite the hardship I expected. The steeds are like breathing, snorting, nimble ATVs of rippling muscle; deep mud, sliding rocks, and thick brush melt away underhoof. Plus, horses do OK on autopilot, giving you the chance to lean back, ride, and let the scenery wash over you.

Good thing. After an hour of trundling through black spruce forest, my guide Max Gauthier and I climb into Icebox Canyon, a series of mile-wide meadows parting giant, snow-striped peaks. We cross a clear, braided stream that rises up to the horses’ knees. They balk—maybe at a log, maybe at the fat grizzly print stamped into the bank—but Mick climbs the far side without pitching me in.

At midday, we dismount and hitch the horses at a makeshift camp to continue on foot. Thinning grass yields to tundra, purple gentians, and lichen-covered rock. Iguana-spined arêtes and blocky peaks lift the horizon. Max glasses the ridges, pre-stalking for future clients. He’s a short, strong Quebecois who tells me his present station comes from a childhood ambition to “be a cowboy.” As we walk, he explains about how mountain goats often “Peter Pan” when shot, leaping





Thousands of moose (left) live in the Sacred Headwaters area. Their paths helped the author reach Gladys Lake (above) and its views of 8,200-foot Mt. Will (center of photo).

up and over a ridge in a final death spasm.

We spot three stone sheep nannies and one kid next to a jade lake nestled into the crest of a pass, and Max shows me how to tiptoe up the 35-degree slope and crouch from rock to rock for cover, getting close. Eventually the sheep see me and prance away up a narrow stone staircase cut into a cliff. There's a nice breeze. The sky is blue. It's really too damn pleasant.

Luckily, we descend in a Pigpen-thick cloud of mosquitoes; they're so bad I start losing my mind and Max loses his binoculars. We slog up a ridge in an attempt to catch a breeze and some relief. It doesn't work. Then I remember the head net another guide gave me in a secret handshake when I left. It puts a few inches between my face and the bugs, but we still build a smudge fire when we return to the horses and our camp. We huddle around for a smoke bath while the tethered horses line up inside a white plume. The bugs don't quiet much even after the Northern twilight blazes into the late evening, and I watch an arrowhead peak above camp go dark against the sky. But I'm no longer fixated on the mosquitoes. I'm wonderfully distracted by my aching bow legs.

the following morning, my training-wheels intro to the Spatsizi backcountry ends. As the wind billows the slate clouds behind us, I say goodbye to Max and Mick on a high, grassy ridge. Ahead, it's hiker-only country. I'm facing 19 miles of wild terrain in Gladys Lake Eco Reserve, the park's restricted epicenter. The highest peaks lie in this area, set aside to provide a protected ecosystem. Twenty-six species of mammals and 68 species of birds clot the untouched spruce-willow-birch forests, muskeg bogs, and alpine tundra. In Spatsizi, this is as deep as it gets.

Max wheels around the horse train and snakes away down the ridge. I watch them disappear into a knot of green. I'm finally on my own, committed to the path of most resistance.

I recall a cautionary tale Max told me. The bush swallows people whole—like a hunter who disappeared on my route in 2005. Not even a scrap of his gear has ever been found despite multiple searches. I like to think I say yes to dumb things and then make smart decisions once I'm there, but after Max disappears I can't help but feel the silence press in on my eardrums. I'm standing in the same spot, surrounded by the same tall grass, veiny rivers, and rippling peaks. But now I'm alone and the beauty has a threatening edge it didn't have a moment ago.

Two feet later, I break the quiet by nearly tripping over a

ptarmigan. It gargles at me angrily while its chicks scatter. I press on and climb 500 feet off-trail to crest the nearest ridge, where wide-angle views of Spatsizi overwhelm me. At least 12 broad valleys radiate in different directions, and down every draw is an endless loveliness, framed by glaciers and empty peaks. I could pick any one and simply vanish.

I consult the map again to make sure of my bearing. I'll hike to Gladys Lake and then make my way to Cold Fish Lake. Max's advice to stay high on a wide alpine shoulder works for a mile or so. Then the problem solving begins. The shoulder melts into thick brush. I brace myself against a steeply angled slope and press on—until I dead-end into a sheer, hidden cleft running valley to summit. I'm cliffed out. Tracing the edge down for a way across, it gets worse: It's a whitewater gorge. I head back downslope to trudge through buckbrush and willow. I'm spitting salad every other step. Branches snag my ankles and tighten like malevolent tentacles, sprawling me into the mud. Thunderstorms boom over my shoulder; then the sun comes back, bringing mosquitoes with it. So, yeah, I'm getting to the good stuff I came here for.

I try to knit game trails together but keep dead-ending into mossy boulders, bogs, and chest-high gullies of flowers. I've heard the remains of an ancient Tahltan food-gathering path might line the bottom of the valley before me, but I don't find it. Finally, a trail crew-worthy moose path saves me. It seems to point straight in the direction I need, probably beelining for a duckweed buffet lining Gladys Lake. I ford a knee-deep and nameless river in the valley bottom. Piles of fresh moose droppings guide me like cairns on the meandering path up through a moss-carpeted forest. It's open and pleasant, clear enough for me to use my head net without ripping it on underbrush. When I see the shores of the lake, I thank the moose aloud.

The water looks like Ovaltine, but the backdrop of 8,200-foot Mt. Will offers a sensational tableau of horned, glaciated peaks. I settle on the sponge near a stony beach and cook up delicious Mountain House spaghetti, seasoned with a lot of soreness, a touch of contentment, and a dash of fear. I watch the gilded peaks get bloody, and even spy a rainbow sprouting from the top of one.

In the night, just as the words in my book begin to blur together, I hear padding right outside my tent, followed by rustles in the bushes and reeds. I stir and catch the muffled drumming of eight, 16, maybe 20 pairs of paws. I scan outside with a headlamp, but I only catch the briefest shadows whooshing into the black. In the morning, I find fresh wolf tracks flanking my tent.

after a leisurely morning with cowboy coffee, I follow the wolf tracks down the shoreline. They lead to a fallen tree that offers a natural bridge over a 3-foot-deep, speeding, sapphire creek. After some poking around on the other side, I pick up the wolf path again. It's like a twisty dog run cut into the green moss, ducking under branches and weaving between trees, charging up slopes. The path is clear, but it turns into a wolf-high tunnel when the woods close in. I'm starting to figure out the ways in which game trails match their makers.

Nearby, I grab a moose path: Easy to follow, deeply cut, and punched out with soup bowl-size potholes. Moose bodies cut a wide swath at head height, creating face space in the willows. But they always seem to end up in a bog. Caribou trails are similar, but begin in the forest and proceed steadily uphill to gain the plateaus. Stone sheep cut switchbacks into dare-you-to-follow territory—good for getting out of the tangled lowlands, great for suicidal cliff diving. All the game trails have one thing in common: They vanish often, with no reason. I find one multispecies turnpike paved with short grass and pine needles, wide and flat enough for a Cadillac. It lasts about 200 yards.

Walking a mile in this terrain is more brutal than I'd imagined. But I start adapting. I survive my bog dive. I stop rushing to reach arbitrary waypoints, and make my goals incremental and environmental: 20 yards to a fairy pond spangled with



mushrooms for lunch; 200 steps to a nap-ready rock under a canopy of whispering birch. My body aches from knees to neck, so I lie down under a giant spruce, sinking into a moss mattress. I even let the mosquitoes settle and fall asleep counting them.

This unnamed Spatsizi creek's wide, sandy banks hold traces of all who pass, including the park's wolf packs.



See the author's video at backpacker.com/spatsizi.

you don't have to bear-wrestle the frontier to taste Spatsizi—that's my choice. This is reinforced as I recuperate at Cold Fish Lake, in a Spartan, red-roofed cabin maintained by the park service, which costs less per night than a burger and a beer and lies a few miles from Bug Lake (I get a horse shuttle in for the pot roast).

I spend two days at Cold Fish, exploring honest-to-goodness trails that radiate like spokes outward into Spatsizi. I tramp 7.5 miles into Airplane Valley, a dayhike sampler of waterfalls, high tundra, flowers, and craggy ridges. A scramble up a scree slope affords a peek back down onto the route that occupied my wilder journey. Another trail leads up and above to the Spatsizi Plateau, an expanse of sub-Arctic tundra barricaded from Pacific rains and snows by mountains. I climb to the 6,500-foot plateau to catch a 10:15 p.m. sunset and arrive just in time to see a herd of caribou blink out into the indigo. I stay until my toes get cold.

With my wilderness reservoir full and the sufferfest over, I can't help but luxuriate in this cabernet-and-cabana phase. But I already find my mind drifting back to the hardest miles. It takes mere hours of relative comfort for a glow of romance to creep into the memories.

When I take off from Cold Fish Lake with Clay Collingwood in his buzzing Cessna 206, I pause from gaping at Spatsizi's royal basins through the windows to watch a video I took on my phone. It's a video I'll watch and rewatch in the months to come.

In it, I'm following fat moose knuckles cast into the gray-sand beach as Arctic grayling rise and spool ripples on a lake set against a cooling sun. I'm still 3 long miles from the cabins. The upward, two-note howl of a loon cuts into my halting dialogue (something about "bushwhacking hell"). Mosquitoes dart into the foreground like hummingbirds.

The hiker on the screen has vacant, wandering eyes and a sunburned face smeared with a mixture of peat, bugs, and blood. I look at him and I think: *I want to go there.* ■

Northwest Field Editor Ted Alvarez's March 2013 story, "The Truth about Bears," was nominated for a National Magazine Award. It also involved a wonderfully hellish hike.

TRIP PLANNER **Park Info** Check before you go, as trails and ATV roads are subject to frequent washouts and are unmaintained. Reserve backcountry cabins at Cold Fish Lake (\$20/night) in advance at bit.do/Spatsizi Season August and September for fewest bugs and most animals **Outfitter** Guided, full-service adventures start at \$2,900 through the Collingwood's Spatsizi Wilderness Vacations. Custom services available (info: spatsizi.com). **Floatplane** Alpine Lakes Air flights into Bug Lake and Cold Fish Lake cost \$600 each way and can accommodate 850 pounds of people and gear (a steal for groups); alpinelakesair.com.

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NEPAL'S

PERFECT

STORM



Last October, a severe blizzard struck Nepal's Annapurna Circuit during peak trekking season. Hundreds of hikers were stranded and dozens died in one of the world's worst hiking disasters. An eyewitness shares his tale.

by Stephen Fabes

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 9

AS WEATHER FORECASTERS pondered the red swirl of a developing cyclone on satellite images of the Andaman Sea, my friend Mike and I were near the town of Besisahar, Nepal, decorating our bikes with prayer flags.

We were off to bike-pack the Annapurna Circuit, a popular 150-mile trail that sweeps around 15 Himalayan peaks topping 23,000 feet, including the world's 10th-highest, 26,545-foot Annapurna 1. Twenty thousand hikers and bikers visit every year, more than 5,000 each October alone. This year would make history—not for how many trekkers arrived, but for the number of who didn't return.

I'm a physician from Oxford, UK, but for the last five years, I've been on a quest to cycle the length of six continents. While in India this September, I met Mike Roy, an American cyclist on a two-year ride through Asia. We both had the Annapurna loop on our agenda, and decided to ride it together.

We cruised through Besisahar, the route's first town, under a clear sky with a light breeze. Perfect weather, it seemed. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to us, forecasters upgraded Cyclone Hudhud to a Very Severe Cyclonic Storm, as sea winds exceeded 100 mph. Several thousand miles south, India braced for landfall with a mass evacuation of the coastal towns in the Bay of Bengal.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 13

AFTER FOUR DAYS of pedaling and lugging our bikes over the rock-strewn Annapurna road, we arrived in the village of Manang. At 11,500 feet, we were two days from 17,769-foot Thorong La pass, the trail's highest point.

In Manang, the high-altitude chill gave a sting to the afternoon air. Rosy-cheeked children wearing so many layers they could hardly flex their limbs welcomed us. As I returned their waves, I noticed a fleet of ragged gray clouds driving up the valley. That night, I walked outside our guesthouse and noticed snow falling. Not a flurry, not even a dusting, just a few pioneering white specks floating out of a starless sky.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 14

A WHITE GLARE wrestled me from sleep. The bright morning light penetrated a slab of snow overhanging the metal roof of our

The Nepali Army and other rescue groups evacuated more than 500 people from the Annapurna area.



room. We were stupefied: October in Manang means brochure-blue skies, not blizzards. We'd heard no weather warnings at any of the trekking permit checkpoints en route. My mind jumped to our impending 6,200-foot climb: *If there are 2 feet of snowfall here, then Thorong La must be impassable.*

With the power and phone lines out, Mike and I bided our time in Manang reading and crowding around a stove fueled by dry yak dung. In the afternoon, a snowman in sunglasses appeared outside the window. More hikers arrived from lower elevations, and the village became a clog of bewildered adventurers, aiming eyes at the still-white sky.

While we hunkered down in Manang, certain that the surprise snow had closed the pass, more than 200 hikers, many in sneakers and jeans, were taking off from Thorung Phedi (14,600 feet) and High Camp (15,900 feet) in light flurries to cross Thorong La pass. A dusting of snow is not uncommon at 17,000 feet, even in the dry season, and most left with hopes that the snow might peter out.

Jeff LaForge, a 27-year-old hiker from Michigan, left Thorung Phedi at 8 a.m, later than most. With his wife and a couple of other hikers, LaForge scrambled up 1,500 feet through stacking snow to High Camp. During that hour, he watched an avalanche thunder down a slope not far from their route. The snowfall was heavier now, visibility all but gone in the whiteout. The decision for him was easy: wait out the storm at High Camp.

Jacob Martinez, a 21-year-old mountain guide from Colorado, was already at High Camp. He, too, had been hoping to cross Thorong La that morning, but dizziness and headache, telltale signs of altitude sickness, convinced him to wait. Uneasiness sank in as he watched scores of trekkers depart from High Camp in the increasing snow. "They didn't all look fit or like seasoned hikers," Jacob told me later. "I was worried."

He was right to be. As the heavy snowfall continued and temperatures dropped dramatically, chaos descended on the pass (see "In The Eye of the Storm," right). Many trekkers, both with and without guides, had little to no experience in the backcountry. Some guides themselves were not well-trained or equipped. The day's tragic events unfolded in a haphazard way. Would trekkers find safety on the far side of the pass? Should they turn around in a whiteout or stay put and risk hypothermia? Each had to make his or her own fateful decision.

In High Camp, as LaForge, Martinez, and the others strived to stay warm, layering clothes and hunkering down in sleeping bags, a Czech couple rushed into the main stone hut. They'd become lost in the whiteout as they tried to return to camp after heading out for Thorong La that morning. Fortunately, they'd spotted a dark shape in the blur of snow. It was a porter and his horse, and the couple followed them back to High Camp.

In the afternoon another porter arrived at High Camp with a hastily scrawled note: *There are Israelis stuck on pass in mortal danger. Send help.* The trail was already hidden under the fast-falling snow—there was no way to make out the path up to the pass. A

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

Survivors share reports from the epicenter of a disaster.

Paul Sheridan, England

"The ground became the same color as the sky. It was difficult to see which way was up and which way was down... But fortunately there was a brief respite and I saw a pole [trail marker].... We picked our way down for two hours through this maze of poles that sometimes we couldn't see for minutes on end." He thought 10 people were following him to safety; it turned out to be more like 150.

—BBC Radio 4, October 17, 2014

Maya Ora, Israel

The inexperienced trekker huddled in a crowded cabin near High Camp. "We didn't have much equipment, and we[d] just dropped our bags and kept going through the storm ... Everybody was saying if you stay you are going to die [of hypothermia or altitude sickness]." After 20 hours, she and six friends left the cabin. "We couldn't see the way. There's no path. There's 150 cm [5 feet] of snow. Then we were walking between the bodies and bags, and we could see our dead friends and the bodies of the guides. I don't know how many, twenties of them. They are buried under the snow. It will be very difficult to find them. It was horrible, a horror,"

—The Guardian, October 16, 2014

depressing reality dawned on those huddled in the hut: An unknown number of trekkers were scattered high on Thorong La, in deadly blizzard conditions, and there was nothing anyone could do.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 15 TO SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18

I AWOKE in Manang to a blue sky. The Annapurnas seemed to smolder as the sun shone on their white faces and gusts whipped snow from their upper reaches. The power came back, and we saw the BBC was reporting deaths on the Annapurna Circuit. Nine bodies identified so far, at least 140 missing. I thought of my family and joined the huddles of anxious trekkers surrounding Manang's few computers to email loved ones. Websites began publishing lists of hikers, their names chased by their status: *safe, deceased, unknown, unknown, unknown...*

The drone of helicopters became as familiar as the low of yaks as the choppers scooted through the Marsyangdi Valley, minutes apart. Soon, the Nepali government's olive, Russian-made models joined the red search-and-rescue ones, ferrying the dead and injured to Pokhara in the biggest rescue effort ever conducted in the region.

Watching the choppers buzz overhead, I couldn't help but wonder: If the cyclone was predicted, why were no weather reports called in, no radio contact, no warning system in place? This is one of the world's most famous and highest hikes, choking with ill-equipped amateurs. Every trekker pays up to \$20 to register with the government-run



Trekkers' Information Management System, designed to help with search and rescues. Shouldn't some of that money be going to help prevent disasters like this? Although, to be fair, Manang has Internet. Any of us could have checked the forecast ourselves.

The foreign doctors volunteering at Manang's medical clinic had set up a triage station and were treating hikers who'd suffered snow blindness while trekking to the ridges surrounding town. When I checked in to see if I could help, the clinic was eerily quiet. Scores of hikers higher up, like La Forge and Martinez, were still stranded, while those rescued from the pass by helicopter were being flown to the hospital in Pokhara. In Manang's small clinic, the anticipated rush for medical care never came.

With the avalanche risk lower and the melt underway, Mike and I set out for the pass on foot, hoping to go as far as we safely could. I thought it might be impossible to reach the pass, but turning back now would be too spirit-sapping. It felt good to be moving again.

As the skies cleared above High Camp on Wednesday, a group of 30 or so hikers arrived from lower-elevation Thorung Phedi determined, now that the blizzard had ceased, to cross the pass. LaForge, Martinez, and others who'd been hunkering at High Camp all along decided to hang back a day to let the trail firm up overnight. The next day, news filtered back to them: The first group had made it to Thorong La, but had been airlifted from the pass to Muktinath, the next town on the other side. The descent was too treacherous and the pass was officially closed for the removal of bodies. LaForge and Martinez made plans to return to Manang.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19

MIKE AND I DECIDED to get as far as we could, uncomfortably aware we were the only ones going up. Our plan was imprecise, but we wondered if the pass would open again by the time we got there. En route, though, we met more hikers in retreat.

"Over there, you see?" one said, pointing to the shape of a man by the river. "It's a body."

Until that point, I hadn't dwelt much on the brutal reality of what was happening around me. But it was set before us now, in the shape of the dead man in the snow. I walked over to him. He was a monk, his head lying on a red rucksack, a blanket draped over his legs, one of his hands balled into a fist. His body was frozen. An army helicopter hovered above, preparing to remove the corpse.

We trekked on in silence. My perspective shifted as I thought of the dead man, skin shining, growing hard in the snow. Death was everywhere: with every cliff face ready to rain down boulders, every crack in the ice a potential avalanche. At times we passed sprawls of avalanche debris like seabeds of pallid coral. I found footprints coming the other way. The lingering echo, perhaps, of a man's last strides.

At High Camp my head ached with the altitude. Mike and I were now the only foreigners this high, aside from one Chinese hiker. The rest had turned back, or been airlifted out. After a quick stop at High Camp, Mike and I continued nervously up but soon encountered waist-deep snow. I thought

of my family I'd just assured I was safe via email; it would be stupid to risk being claimed by an avalanche now. We turned around.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 20

THE NEXT MORNING, sunlight roused the valley, reawakening the colors and contours of rock exposed by five days of sunny skies and melting snow. Mike and I trudged back toward Manang through the ice and shrubs.

Fewer choppers flew overhead, and a week after the snowfall began, the village was a ghost of the bustling refuge it had been. More than 500 people had been rescued from the trail. Many of the earliest to leave High Camp on Tuesday had made it over the pass to Muktinath; others either found refuge in a stone hut below the pass or got lost and perished in the snow. Some found the hut and then left, only to succumb to the same fate as the rest.

Even in the shadow of tragedy, the Himalayas south of Manang looked as beautiful as ever: The high rock faces sheeted with snow, the October sky a piercing blue, the yellowing larches. Tranquility had returned as fast as it had vanished. ■

Stephen Fabes continued his bikepacking trip: cyclingthe6.com.

THE AFTERMATH In all, 518 people (including 304 foreign trekkers) were rescued from the region and at least 43 died (including 21 guides and trekkers on the Annapurna Circuit). A tourism official with the Nepali government told *Reuters* that, in the future, trekkers will be required to hire guides and rent GPS tracking units. Official new rules will be announced in the spring.



You'll especially love the shuttle logistics (none). Here are North America's best loop hikes.

PERFECT
CIRCLES

No turning back. Every view is fresh. Not a single step feels wasted.



BY DOUGALD
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See Mt. Rainier
from Indian Henry's
Hunting Ground on
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Trail, a 93-mile
loop that circles the
peak.



Ascending Idaho's
Snowside Pass,
above Twin Lakes

CARIBBEAN MEETS ALPINE

ALICE-TOXAWAY

LAKES LOOP, ID

18 MILES, 2 TO 3 DAYS

CRYSTAL-CLEAR lakes cupped by granite peaks, an enormous crag called El Capitan—you might think you're in Yosemite except for the lack of crowds. This circuit around 10,280-foot Parks Peak in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area starts with the 5.5-mile trail to Alice Lake. Bring trekking poles for creek crossings that may be challenging, especially during afternoon runoff. Continue another mile to camp by Twin Lakes, where the Caribbean-blue water and granite reefs suggest snorkeling—if you could stay in the icy water longer than 30 seconds. Next day, make the climb to 9,390-foot Snowside Pass, true to its name until late July. If the weather's good, scramble .8 mile up the east ridge of 10,651-foot Snowside Peak. Then descend 1.5 miles to Toxaway Lake, where the big brookies swim. Close the loop by hiking northeast down the canyon of Yellow Belly Creek, passing waterfalls and Farley Lake. Pack a puffy *and* a swimsuit—the diurnal temperature swings in the Sawtooths are legendary.

TRAILHEAD 43.984423, -114.871023*; **TIN CUP**, 2.2 MILES WEST OF ID 75, 18 MILES SOUTH OF STANLEY **RED TAPE** FREE TRAILHEAD PERMITS **SEASON** LATE JULY TO MID-SEPTEMBER **INFO** FS.USDA.GOV/SAWTOOTH



Top: Climbing above Snowmass Lake on the Four Pass Loop. Bottom: Lincoln Woods Trail on the Pemi Loop.



The Classics

These loops set the gold standard for circular hikes. Yes, they're popular, but with very, very good reason.

Pemi Loop, NH (32 miles)

This iconic White Mountains trek is a peakbagger's delight, crossing eight summits and wracking up 18,000 feet of elevation change.

Four Pass Loop, CO (26 miles)

Tour Colorado's most photogenic twin peaks—the Maroon Bells—amid acres of colorful wildflowers in mid- to late summer.

Rae Lakes Loop, CA (41 miles)

They don't call it Paradise Valley for nothing. Target this Kings Canyon National Park hike in September to avoid crowds. Pack two memory cards.

KISS THE SKY

SKY RIM LOOP, WY

21 MILES, 3 DAYS

YES, SPEND A DAY scoping Yellowstone's geysers and bison herds like everyone else. But then do what few others do: Discover the park's gorgeous mountain scenery on this lollipop loop in Yellowstone's northwest corner. Follow the Dailey Creek Trail through broad meadows and camp at 7,500 feet just as you enter the woods (site WF2), where deer, elk, or moose may browse at dusk. (Be bear smart: This is also prime grizzly country.) This site is only a couple of hours from the start, but you'll want to hit the next day's skyline traverse early to avoid afternoon storms. Load up on water, climb to the crest of the Gallatin Range, and head southeast, rolling along an open, grassy spine for more than 5 miles, with views to the Madison Range, Lone Peak, and the Absarokas. At the far end of the traverse, don't miss the .3-mile trip across a knife-edge to 9,930-foot Bighorn Peak, a ragged fin of black rock frequented by wild sheep. As you descend toward Black Butte Creek, watch for stumps of fossilized trees in the Gallatin Petrified Forest. Spend your second night at Black Butte Creek site WF1 (after about 12 miles), and enjoy views across a meadow. From there, it's an easy 5-mile hike to the trailhead.

TRAILHEAD 45.048440, -111.139641; **DAILEY CREEK**, WY 191, JUST SOUTH OF PARK BOUNDARY **RED TAPE** BACKCOUNTRY PERMIT REQUIRED (\$25) **SEASON** MID-JULY TO EARLY SEPTEMBER **INFO** NPS.GOV/YELL



FOLLOW THE FLOWERS

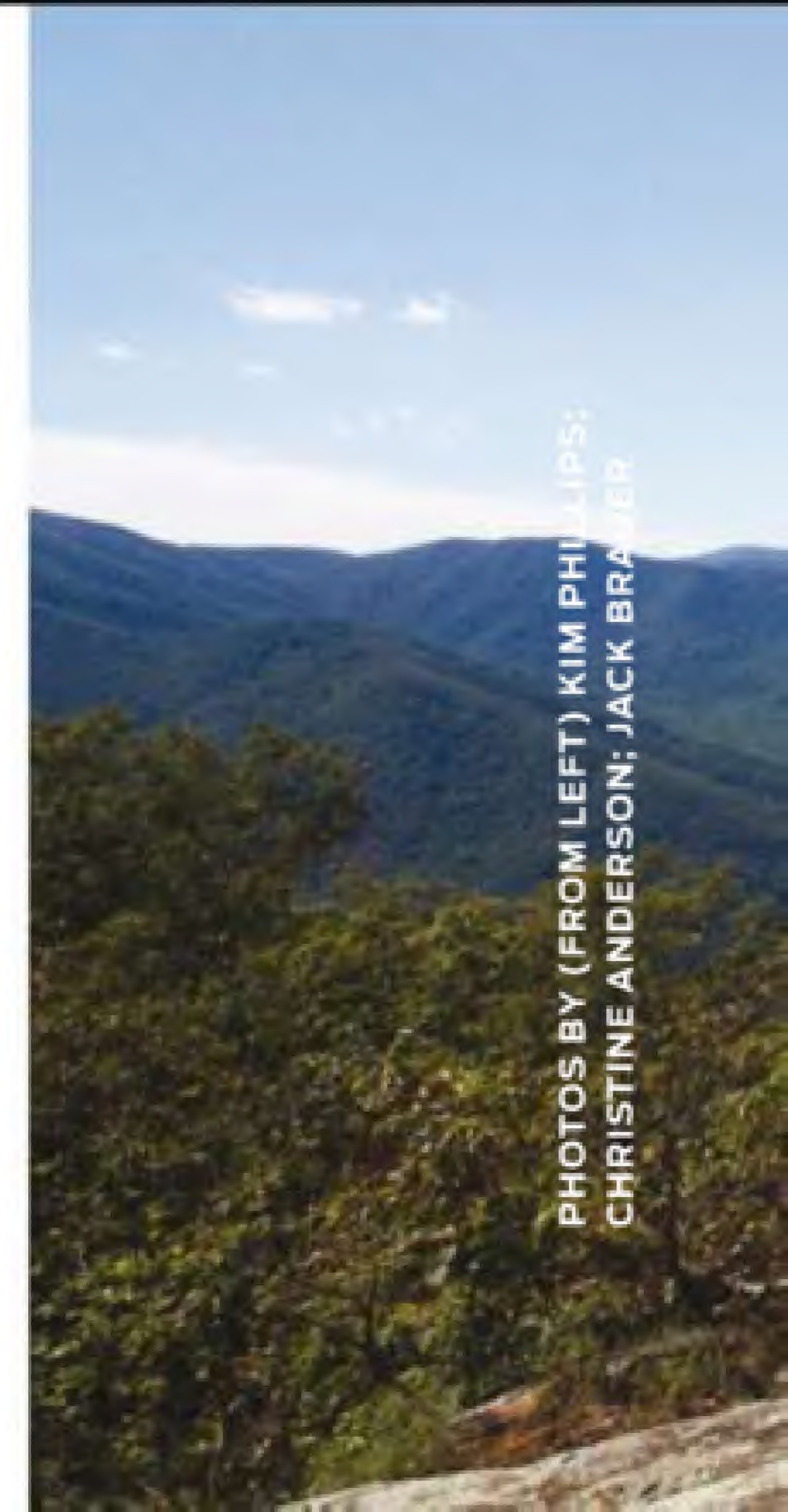
THREE RIDGES, VA

14 MILES, 2 DAYS

A **QUAD-BUSTING** stretch of the Appalachian Trail leads over four summits and past beds of white and pink trillium and thickets of wild azalea and rhododendron on this weekender. Day one is all Blue Ridge mountain majesty as you follow the AT from Reeds Gap over the tops of Bee Mountain, Hanging Rock, Three Ridges (your highpoint at 3,970 feet), and Chimney Rock. After a steep, slippery descent, call it a day at the shelter and campsites alongside Harper's Creek. Next day, ascend to a junction with the blue-blazed Mau-Har Trail and head back north up flower-lined Campbell Creek. After 2.4 miles, reach a 40-foot cascade that splashes wildly in the spring, complete with inviting pools for a quick cool-off. A steep climb leads back to the Maupin Field shelter, where you can retrace your steps to Reeds Gap—and celebrate at Devils Backbone Brewing Company, just 10 minutes away.

TRAILHEAD 37.901659, -78.985287; REEDS GAP, MILE-MARKER 13.7 ON THE BLUE RIDGE PKWY. **RED TAPE** NONE **SEASON** YEAR-ROUND, MID-APRIL TO EARLY JUNE FOR PEAK FLOWERS AND FALLS **INFO** FS.USDA.GOV/GWJ

Get a look at where you've been and where you're going from the AT's rock outcrops.



PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) KIM PHILLIPS;
CHRISTINE ANDERSON; JACK BRAUER



SIERRA HIGH-LIGHT TOUR

THOUSAND ISLAND LAKE, CA

22 MILES, 2 TO 3 DAYS

A LONG WEEKEND in the Ansel Adams Wilderness combining primo stretches of the Pacific Crest and John Muir Trails? If that's not enticing enough, Muir himself called this hike's centerpiece, 13,150-foot Mt. Ritter, the "noblest mountain of the [Sierra]." From the Agnew Meadows trailhead, go counterclockwise, starting on the High Trail (PCT) for an overview of Ritter and its neighbors, Banner Peak and the Minarets. These craggy summits, comprised of dark metamorphic rock, tower above the surrounding lakes and glacier-polished granite shelves like sentinels. The High Trail passes a tremendous viewpoint of the peaks about 3 miles in, then continues through meadows thick with corn lilies and lupine. Contour around to Thousand Island Lake at 7.8 miles and find unobstructed views of 12,945-foot Banner Peak (pictured, left), with crevasses riddling the remnant glaciers on its north face. Go to the southwest side of the lake for the best campsites. In the morning, continue south along the John Muir Trail past Emerald and Ruby Lakes, and over an easy pass to Garnet Lake. (These lakes and the nearby creeks are good places to try for brookies, rainbows, and brown trout—possibly even a golden trout, the California state fish.) At the Shadow Creek Trail, take the 1.6-mile detour west to a campsite by Ediza Lake. Get up early for the sunrise reflection of the Minarets, all gold against still water, before returning to Agnew Meadows via the Shadow Creek and River Trails.

TRAILHEAD MAMMOTH MOUNTAIN ADVENTURE CENTER; TAKE SHUTTLE TO AGNEW MEADOWS (37.682849, -119.084818) **RED TAPE** RESERVE PERMITS (\$5/PERSON PLUS \$6 BOOKING FEE) AT RECREATION.GOV; BEAR CANISTERS REQUIRED **SEASON** MID-JULY TO EARLY OCTOBER **INFO** FS.USDA.GOV/INYO

[See Banner Peak from Thousand Island Lake.](#)



CANYONS, ROCK ART & RUINS

FISH AND OWL CANYONS, UT

16 MILES, 2 TO 3 DAYS

THIS CEDAR MESA route packs a lifetime of desert highlights—slick-rock canyons, ancient ruins and pictographs, meandering creeks, and red sandstone arches and hoodoos—into a weekend loop. Start with a flat, 1.9-mile hike to the rim of Fish Creek Canyon and a crux scramble down a slickrock slot. (Carry a 20-foot length of rope to lower your packs.) Switchback to the canyon floor, keeping a sharp eye out—binoculars are helpful—for the ruins of Ancestral Puebloan homes and granaries high in alcoves on the south-facing walls between pinnacles of Cedar Mesa sandstone. Cottonwoods shade the campsites at the confluence of Fish and Owl Creeks. If you have time, continue down Fish Creek a mile or two to find more ruins, including the Watchtower, a 500-year-old structure perched atop a mushroom of rock, accessible only by a shaky log ladder. For the return leg, hike up Owl Creek Canyon past Nevills Arch, a 140-foot span on the northeast rim. Pools below the pour-offs in the upper canyon make good rest stops or campsites for a second night. Just before you climb out of the canyon, find a well-preserved ceremonial kiva.

TRAILHEAD 37.474300, -109.818014; COUNTY ROAD 253, 15 MILES SOUTH OF BLANDING **RED TAPE** RESERVE PERMITS (\$8/PERSON) UP TO THREE MONTHS AHEAD (435-587-1510, WEEKDAYS 8 A.M.–NOON) **SEASON** SPRING AND FALL HAVE THE BEST WEATHER (BUT ARE BUSY) **INFO** BLM.GOV/UT/ST/EN/FO/MONTICELLO

[Camp along Fish Creek on night one.](#)





Top: Upper Paintbrush Canyon in Grand Teton National Park. Bottom: Hikers descend Aurora Peak on the Wonderland Trail in Mt. Rainier National Park.

◀ The Classics

Wonderland Trail, WA (93 miles)
Count the glaciers—more than two dozen of them—as you circumnavigate mighty Tahoma. Tip: Apply for a permit March 15.

Paintbrush Canyon & Cascade Canyon, WY (18 miles)
The Tetons' best loop (and that's saying something) climaxes with all-star views of the Cathedral Group.

Outer Mountain Loop, TX (30 miles)
Discover challenging desert and mountain hiking in Big Bend. For more trip ideas in this spring-perfect park, see page 26.

Royal Arch Loop, AZ (34 miles)
Looking for a challenge? Enjoy stellar campsites, seclusion, and a short technical rock climb on a five-day loop off the South Rim.

VIEWS & BERRIES

GRAFTON LOOP, ME

39 MILES, 3 TO 4 DAYS

CROSSING NINE peaks, this route links a rocky section of the AT with 31 miles of smooth singletrack for a view lover's tour de force. Start at the south end and hike clockwise, traversing the bare granite ledges of Sunday River Whitecap, where tasty blueberries (ripe in August) from trailside bushes will compete with the views for your attention. Cross Miles Notch to reach a spur to Slide Campsite after 10.5 miles. Next day, climb over 4,170-foot Old Speck, the fifth-highest peak in Maine, with views to Mahoosuc Notch from an observation tower rising high above the spruce trees. Detour west on the AT to a campsite by Speck Pond (\$8) at the north end of the Mahoosuc Range, nestled in a spruce-lined mountain bowl and said to be the highest pond in Maine at 3,400 feet. Day three is long but rewarding, following the AT through cliff-lined Grafton Notch, over the twin Baldpate Peaks, and down a ladder on Lightning Ledge to a relaxing evening at Lane Campsite, where a spur trail leads to a waterfall and swimming hole. Finish with a 13.2-mile trek through fern-floored woods and past a final viewpoint atop Puzzle Mountain.

TRAILHEAD 44.539216, -70.829565; ME 26, OPPOSITE EDDY RD., 4.7 MILES NORTH OF ME 2 IN NEWRY
RED TAPE USE DESIGNATED CAMPSITES; NO FIRES
SEASON SPRING THROUGH FALL
INFO MATC.ORG

CIRCLE THE ROCKIES

COLLEGIATE PEAKS LOOP, CO

160 MILES, 12 TO 18 DAYS (ALTERNATIVE: 8 TO 12 DAYS)

SINCE 2012, two separate 80-mile alignments of the Colorado Trail, on either side of the Collegiate Peaks, have created a grand circuit encompassing 11 of the state's Fourteeners—two weeks in the Rockies' alpine zone. Starting down the east side from a trailhead by Twin Lakes allows for good resupply timing and eases into the hike with lower-altitude terrain (plus a soak stop at Princeton Hot Springs). The newer western route is a highline that crisscrosses the Continental Divide, passing turquoise Lake Ann, nestled below the imposing Three Apostles, and Hope Pass, the 12,620-foot high point of the Leadville 100 trail run. Enrolling for the full Collegiate tour requires about two weeks, but you can shortcut the route by four days and still catch the 16-mile stretch between Cottonwood Pass and Tincup Road that just opened in 2014. For this crash course, head south from North Cottonwood Creek on the east side of the range. A week later, after crossing Cottonwood Pass, drop to Texas Creek and leave the Collegiate West Trail, climb to Browns Pass, and descend Kroenke Lake Trail to your car.

TRAILHEAD 39.072455, -106.305426; TWIN LAKES DAM, 16 MILES SOUTH OF LEADVILLE ON COUNTY ROAD 25; NORTH COTTONWOOD CREEK (38.871096, -106.265869), FOREST ROAD 365, 8.5 MILES WEST OF BUENA VISTA
RED TAPE FREE TRAILHEAD PERMITS
SEASON MID-JULY TO MID-SEPTEMBER
INFO COLORADOTRAIL.ORG

Catch sunset on the Three Apostles from Harrison Flats, just a few hundred yards off the CDT.



MISSING LINKS

3 SOON-TO-BE
CLASSIC LOOPS THAT
ARE STILL IN THE
WORKS

Ring the Peak Trail, CO

This 63-mile loop will circle 14,114-foot Pikes Peak using a combination of trails and some 4WD and paved roads. With nearly 80 percent of the route open to hikers now, it has sections suitable for every season. fotp.com

Southern

Appalachian Loop

With 99 percent of the route complete, you can already enjoy almost all of this four-state, 350-mile link-up of the Appalachian, Foothills, Mountains-to-Sea, and other trails. Just a sliver of land remains to be incorporated, and the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy is on the case. carolinamountain.org

Eastern Loop, MO

Ready for a deep immersion in Missouri's hardwood wilderness? This 300-mile loop off the Ozark Trail traverses some of the region's wildest areas and crosses the state high point, Taum Sauk Mountain. It's 72 percent complete. ozarktrail.com



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SWITZERLAND ON THE CHEAP ►

DEVILS DOME, WA

43 MILES, 5 TO 6 DAYS

THE DEVIL LOOMS large on this rugged loop—you'll pass Devils Creek, Pass, Park, Junction, and Dome—and you may curse like Satan during the initial 3,300-foot, 4-mile climb to McMillan Park. Then, you'll swear you're in heaven, enraptured by views over alpine meadows jammed with summer paintbrush, columbine, and lupine and dotted with stately firs and larches. Follow the Jackita Ridge and Devils Ridge Trails as you roll along the ridges of the Pasayten Wilderness to the east and north of ice-draped Crater Mountain and 9,066-foot Jack Mountain. The latter's broad Nohokomeen Glacier fills your camera viewscreen like a scene straight out of Switzerland. At mile 20, camp atop Devils Dome for sunset and sunrise views over the endless peaks of British Columbia and west to Mt. Baker, then drop to the turquoise waters of Ross Lake. If you're short on time, you can shortcut the route by catching a water taxi down the lake, but the 13-mile shore hike along the East Bank Trail makes a beautiful way to end the hike.

TRAILHEAD 48.706524, -120.918482; **CANYON CREEK, MILEPOST 141 ON WA 20, 36 MILES EAST OF MARBLEMOUNT RED TAPE FREE NPS BACKCOUNTRY PERMIT FOR CAMPING AT ROSS LAKE (OBTAIN AT MARBLEMOUNT RANGER STATION); PLUS NORTHWEST FOREST PARKING PASS SEASON MID-JULY TO MID-SEPTEMBER INFO** FS.USDA.GOV/OKAWEN; NPS.GOV/NOCA

SLOWER IS BETTER

LA CLOCHE SILHOUETTE, ONTARIO

49 MILES, 6 TO 8 DAYS

FRENCH VOYAGEURS named these mountains La Cloche ("the bell"), and the deceptively tough terrain might ring your chimes if you're not in good shape. Despite no summits over 1,800 feet, this Killarney Provincial Park loop gains almost 8,500 feet as it winds over bare ridges of 2.3 billion-year-old quartzite; park rangers suggest a schedule

of only 5 to 8 miles a day. Just as likely to slow the pace: frequent stops to photograph azure lakes, old-growth hemlock forests, and blindingly white cliffs. Going clockwise lets you start on relatively moderate terrain, though you can still expect wet boots and rough footing (including beaver-dam stream crossings). Keep an eye out for moose, black bears, otters, and osprey from the lakeside campsites—target the unique H21 site, a peninsula poking into Three Narrows Lake. From here, it's all up and down—soak your feet at day's end at secluded campsites by Little Mountain Lake (H33) and Boundary Lake (H35)—until

the Crack, the chasm that exits the mountains. Enjoy views stretching as far as Georgian Bay on Lake Huron.

TRAILHEAD 46.014169, -81.401650; **GEORGE LAKE, ONTARIO 637, NORTH SIDE OF LAKE HURON RED TAPE TRIP PLAN MUST BE FILED AND CAMPSITES RESERVED (\$12/NIGHT PLUS \$13 BOOKING FEE; 888-668-7275) SEASON MID-MAY TO MID-OCTOBER INFO** FRIEND-SOFKILLARNEYPARK.CA

[Overlooking Killarney's lake district](#)



PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) MICHAEL P. GADOMSKI; ANDY PORTER



Overlook Devils Park and the Cascade Crest from the Jackita Ridge Trail in the Pasayten Wilderness.

SURF & TURF

EAGLE ROCK
LOOP, AR

27 MILES,
3 TO 4 DAYS

FROM WADING THROUGH fast-moving creeks to laboring over steep ridges, your wilderness skills will be tested in the surprisingly tough terrain of the Ouachita Mountains. This three-day clockwise circuit of Arkansas' longest loop trail starts at Little Missouri Falls, which enables you to hit prime campsites and break up the biggest stretch of climbing. Head south through a narrow gap to reach the first of many fords of the Little Missouri—depending on recent rains, these may require rock-hopping

or deep wading (trekking poles help). Follow the Winding Stairs Trail to sweet campsites (around mile 10) by riverside bluffs of Arkansas novaculite, a chert-like rock that Native Americans chipped into weapons and tools. Easier hiking along the Viles Branch Equestrian Trail leads to the Athens-Big Fork Trail and the first of six big ridges to surmount. Enjoy the panorama from Eagle Rock Vista, then head down to a streamside campsite near East Saline Creek. After a long morning of ups and downs, rejoin the

winding Little Mo and head downstream to close the loop.

TRAILHEAD 34.422655, -93.919579; **LITTLE MISSOURI FALLS**, OFF MINE CREEK RD., 27 MILES WEST OF MT. IDA **RED TAPE** CALL (870) 356-4186 TO CHECK RIVER LEVEL—IF IT'S OVER 4 FEET AT LANGLEY GAUGE, WADING MAY BE TOO DANGEROUS. **SEASON** LATE FALL AND EARLY SPRING ARE BEST. **INFO** FS.USDA.GOV/OUACHITA



The Timberline Trail's Sandy River can be impossible to ford in early summer. Aim for an early-morning crossing, when runoff is lower.

The Classics

Timberline Trail, OR (41 miles)

After you hike this CCC-built loop around Mt. Hood, odds are good you'll be inspired to climb the 11,239-foot mountain.

North Circle Route, MT (65 miles)

This Glacier National Park hike delivers with wildlife, wildflowers, and passage through the famous Ptarmigan Tunnel.

Three Sisters Loop, OR (55 miles)

Explore a volcanic wonderland with a sweet scenery-to-sweat ratio, thanks to the route's modest elevation change.



Get beta on all of these classics at backpacker.com/classicloops.



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1,200 feet above
Machu Picchu
on the climb up
Huayna Picchu.



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DO IT

Neither this trek nor the one on the following pages require a guide, but we recommend using one; the author used Adventure Life Guides (adventure-life.com). Expect to pay roughly \$1,535 for a five-day Choquequirao Trek and \$2,285 for a seven-day Salkantay Trek. **Season** For the best weather (but more people), go May through August; for guaranteed solitude, pack rain and snow gear and aim for December through April.



SOLITUDE LOVER'S PICK THE OTHER MACHU PICCHU

Choquequirao Trek, 40 miles

OK, you won't find true solitude at Machu Picchu itself, so the best way to see 15th-century Incan ruins without the crowds is on a four-day out-and-back to the Choquequirao settlement, an old Incan bastion of stone temples and structures atop a truncated hilltop. But there's a catch: You have to do it within the next year or so. Officials are planning to install

a tramway to the ruins; once the tram is in place, Choquequirao will be almost as bustling as its more popular alternative.

From Cachora, my guided group followed the Apurímac River gorge (●), which is up to 9,800 feet deep in spots—nearly twice as deep as the Grand Canyon. Despite hiking in August (prime trekking season in Peru), we encountered only a handful of locals on the path, including a corn farmer (●) and a cowboy (●). After tent-camping by the river on night one, we spent the second night just a 45-minute walk from the Choquequirao ruins, allowing plenty of time to explore. While the ancient relics aren't as dramatic as those at Machu Picchu, you can only access them on foot, so we had the stone-ringed settlement (● and ●) to ourselves.





ALPINE
LOVER'S PICK
**ALTO
ROUTE**

Salcantay Trek, 38 miles

If you subscribe to the mountains-make-everything-better philosophy of backpacking, you'll love reaching Machu Picchu via this Andean route.

The five-day Salcantay Trek winds through lush lowlands (●) and over a 15,200-foot alpine pass (●) en route to Machu Picchu. The trek isn't quite as overrun as its famous alter-

native, the Inca Trail, but it's still popular, so I aimed for December—the height of rainy season—and encountered just a few trekkers (and daily rain). While non-technical, the route proved more challenging than the Choquequirao, as we had to trudge through mud and 6 inches of fresh snow to cross the pass. Fittingly, “Salcantay” means “Savage” in the Quechua language.

When we cruised into Machu Picchu (●) on day five, we capped off our adventure with the super-steep, three-hour Putucusi Mountain hike (●). This out-and-back ascends ladders to a summit vantage across the valley to Machu Picchu—a must for any hiker, no matter how you get there.







GONE HIKING

TERMINAL CANCER.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO *if* YOUR DOCTOR

DELIVERED *the* SCARIEST TWO WORDS

****in the* ENGLISH LANGUAGE?***

ANDY LYON WENT *for a* HIKE.

by **CASEY LYONS** *photography by* **KEVIN STEELE**

The kid limps into Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital out of the late-September night. His pack is worn and dusty, his face cloaked in a beard that grew out rather than down. It's the first time he's been inside a hospital in 23 months. The last time, his doctor gave him 24 months to live.¶ He walks up to the admitting nurse. "Can I help you?" she asks.

"I think I need some help. I've been on the trail and I keep falling down."

She directs him to have a seat, then asks him his name.

"Astro," he says.

"Your name is Astro?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. My name is Andy. Andy Lyon. I've been walking the trail for a while and everyone calls me Astro."

"Where do you live?"

"Well," he says. "I live on the trail."

"You live on the trail?"

"Yeah."

"Do you have a mailing address?"

"Yeah, my parents live in Laguna Beach, California"

"How did you get here?" she asks. It is, after all, south-central Washington.

"I walked here."

"You walked here from Laguna Beach?"

"I actually walked here from Mexico," Andy says, and can immediately tell what she's thinking: *psych ward*. "Let me start from the beginning."

But where is the beginning? Maybe it's when he was first diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma four years ago at age 19. Or, maybe it's after the second relapse, after the first round of chemotherapy failed and then the stem-cell transplant failed and then he was given a 1-in-10 chance of living another five years. Or maybe it's the moment when he decided to try to heal himself by hiking the 2,655-mile Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada. Would the nurse even believe that story?

Would anyone believe that story?

FEW FOOTPRINTS circle the PCT monument at the Mexico border, 2,300 trail miles south of Yakima, in early April. Most would-be thru-hikers appear a

few weeks later, after they've wrapped up logistics: how to feed themselves, how to clothe themselves, how to minimize suffering on the journey. But Andy makes his footprints here today.

From the look of his trail runners, these are the first steps he's taken in them at all. He walks over to the monument, locates the trail register, and writes, "The longest journey begins with a single step." It's just the kind of stuff written by hikers filling the pages preceding this one, people who knew to start earlier than 1 p.m. on a sun-blasted trail.

He's olive-skinned but pale. His white, button-down sunshirt looks starched, and his trail pants sag around his thighs and calves. On top, he wears a beige, full-brimmed hat that makes him look like Gilligan gone rogue. He smiles and it's hard to tell if he's happy or wincing. Or maybe he's just squinting into the desert sun.

Andy shoulders his 22-pound pack, the strap sitting right next to the scar the chemo port left. He starts down the trail, a ribbon of dust snaking through the shrubs and over the low rollers out to the northern horizon. Even though this is just a trial run for his thru-hike, if he makes it 42 miles to Mt. Laguna, it'll be both his farthest backpacking trip ever and his first time going solo.

He walks and the nerves dissipate into the rhythm of his footsteps. In camp, he pulls out the unused alcohol stove he made from a soda can and Internet instructions, and fills it with diesel-line deicer. When he sets the lighter to it, fire engulfs the whole thing, sneaks out under his windscreen, and lights the ground on fire in a 3-foot circle. He stomps at it, then grabs for his socks and slaps at it. Then he fishes out his cell phone and texts his mom: *Hey!*

Safe and sound ... :) just set up my tent, now making chow. 11 miles today, 1 horny toad, 2 snakes (one rattler, one gardner). This is great! :D xoxo"

Back at home in Laguna Beach, Betsy Gosselin is relieved. She has no idea what to expect during this thing either, but she already decided that she would do whatever needed to be done to support her boy—time, money, anything. So what if she hadn't even heard of the Pacific Crest Trail three months ago?

On the fourth day, he waits for Betsy at the predetermined pick-up spot and writes in his journal: "Well, that wasn't so hard!"

NATURE IS A faith healer. Everyone implicitly understands that, even if they don't really get how it works. Plenty of people harness the power of wilderness to clear their heads, or to recharge their batteries. There's power in nature's beauty, and strength to spare. Andy believes that, too, and his journey would test the limits of that power.

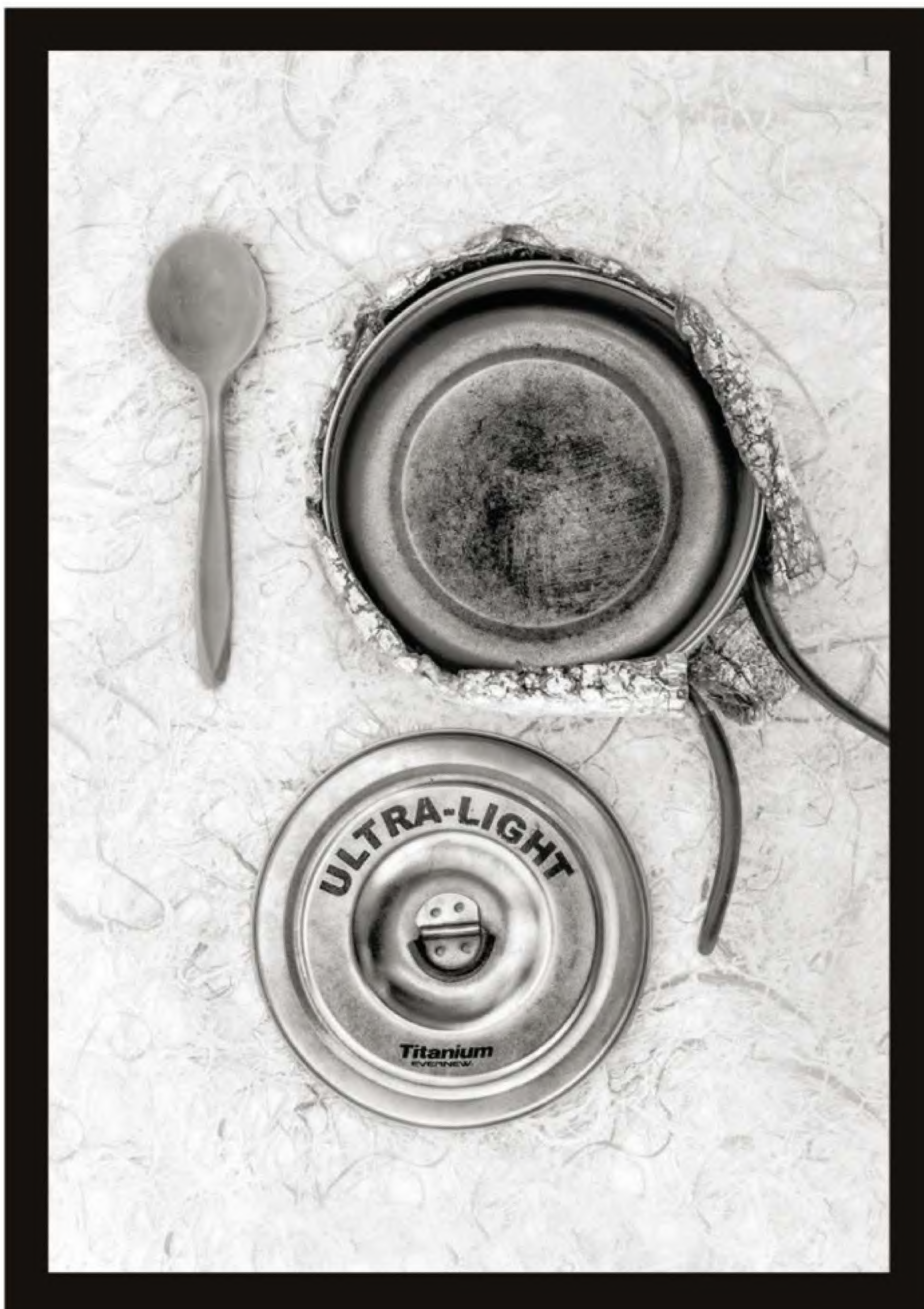
He was a freshman studying astrophysics at the University of California at Berkeley when an X ray revealed a dense, white mass at the base of his neck. A biopsy confirmed what doctors feared: cancer. Hodgkin's lymphoma. But the prognosis was good: With treatment, some 90 percent of people so afflicted remain cancer-free in five years.

But the treatment isn't pretty. After six months of chemo, even Andy's eyelashes fell out, and the nausea came in long sweeping fits that would leave him retching for hours. That's how Western medicine fights Hodgkin's. Andy, full of optimism, was a model patient. He memorized his drug regimen, studied up on what each ingredient of the cocktail did and what baggage came with it.

It worked, and Andy, now in remission, took a six-week victory tour across Central America, exploring Mayan cities and swimming in the waters of the Lago de Atitlán in Guatemala.

He re-enrolled at Berkeley for his sophomore year, but eight months later, a follow-up PET-CT scan revealed the cancer had returned as stage 4, spread throughout his body and in his bone marrow. His chances of survival dropped to the mid-60s. Betsy was staggered, but she held it together for Andy and her family. When she had a night alone, she let the sadness come. "This time it could mean death," she wrote on her private blog. "Andy could die. I feel the immense fear of losing my boy."

Andy did what his doctor said: a



ANDY USED THIS COOKSET to **PREPARE** the **MEALS HIS MOM DEHYDRATED, PACKED,** and **SHIPPED TO HIM ALONG** the **WAY. PREVIOUS: HIS PACK**

stem-cell transplant that would leave him in isolation on a sealed hospital floor for three weeks while his immune system rebooted. When he grew sick of the confinement, he convinced his mom and stepdad, Michael, that he needed some fresh air. They loaded him into a wheelchair, pushed him down the hall, and slipped through the elevator doors. "The trick," Betsy later said, "is to walk like you know what you're doing."

But 100 days later, the cancer was back, again. His doctor informed him that he was not a candidate for another

stem-cell transplant. His five-year survival odds sank to 10 percent.

The normal 20-something, hearing the news, might erupt in a mix of rage, sadness, and frustration, cursing the universe for the awful unfairness of it all. But Andy didn't react like that. When he visited his Ayurvedic practitioner (a form of Indian medicine) a few weeks later, he didn't even mention the relapse.

He came to believe that maybe the cancer wasn't the real problem, but a symptom of something larger and more profound. Maybe, if he located the things inside him causing the cancer, he could heal himself. That April, in a ceremony organized by his mother, Andy marked his completion of Western medicine and a new start to his healing. It kicked off a year spent meditating beside spiritual gurus in the American Southwest. He car-camped around the Sierra, sometimes discovering unmapped stands of sequoias and sleeping beneath them. It was his Summer of Bliss.

But that treatment plan was no better. On October 20, 2010, pain forced Andy home to Laguna Beach to see his doctor. A PET-CT scan showed tumors throughout his body. His doctor suggested that without medical intervention, Andy would die within two years.

Other cancer patients in this situation have refused chemo, choosing quality over quantity in their remaining time. Andy rejected chemo as well, but that didn't mean he was giving up on a cure. He had other ideas. He now believed that the only way to defeat the cancer—to win—was to prove that he was stronger than it.

In January 2012, on a 10-day silent retreat near Yosemite, Andy picked his battlefield: the Pacific Crest Trail.

He knew it sounded ludicrous—a young man with zero long-distance hiking experience and a terminal disease is going to cure his cancer by walking really far? Among responses to a terminal diagnosis, his notion was, to put it charitably, unique.

His family, friends, and spiritual guide objected. But Andy had made up his mind. He was going to thrust himself into the heart of hardship and beauty to seize control of his fate and challenge his disease in a fight to the death. If he won, he'd be healed. If it killed him, that'd be an OK way to go. The only thing he couldn't accept was waiting around to die.

THERE'S A TRADITION among thru-hikers to take on trail names. Not only do these handles represent membership in the tribe, they're also an acknowledgement that the things that

happen on a long-distance hike transcend normal life.

Andy wants his trail name to be about his diet. Whereas other hikers' food bags—especially guys his age—contain Snickers Bars and instant Ramen noodles, Andy's is an apothecary of organic foods and vitamins. He wants to be known for running on such premium fuel. Then, a week and a day after leaving the southern terminus, he meets Gourmet.

Andy is already in his tent when Gourmet cruises past on the purple-painted desert flats 75 miles north of the border, rapping about snowboarding. He camps a short distance away, and, the next morning, Gourmet apologizes for the disturbance. But Andy just laughs and asks him to sing the lyrics once again. Gourmet is a 39-year-old musician from Seattle, doing his first thru-hike, but Andy doesn't ask his real name. Nor does he tell him—or anyone else—that he has cancer. The two become quick friends.

The rolling folds of the Volcan Mountains elevate them to views of San Jacinto Peak (snow-dusted after a recent storm) and deposit them among the flower-speckled lowlands of the high desert in bloom. Chaparral and cactus line the hillsides as Andy, Gourmet, and two other hikers travel the hillsides sometimes together, sometimes apart.

In the town of Warner Springs, they set up their sleeping bags on the lawn of the fire station and stare at the sky. Andy knows all the constellations, the planets, the mythology attached to each; he points them out when the other hikers ask. Gourmet, considering this, says Andy shall henceforth be known as Astro. And so it is.

He is Astro now and he is new and he is in control of his story. To other hikers, he's not sick; he's not a cancer victim, or a novice hiker. He's just another skinny, early 20s guy with no history, lots of blisters, and a scraggly beard.

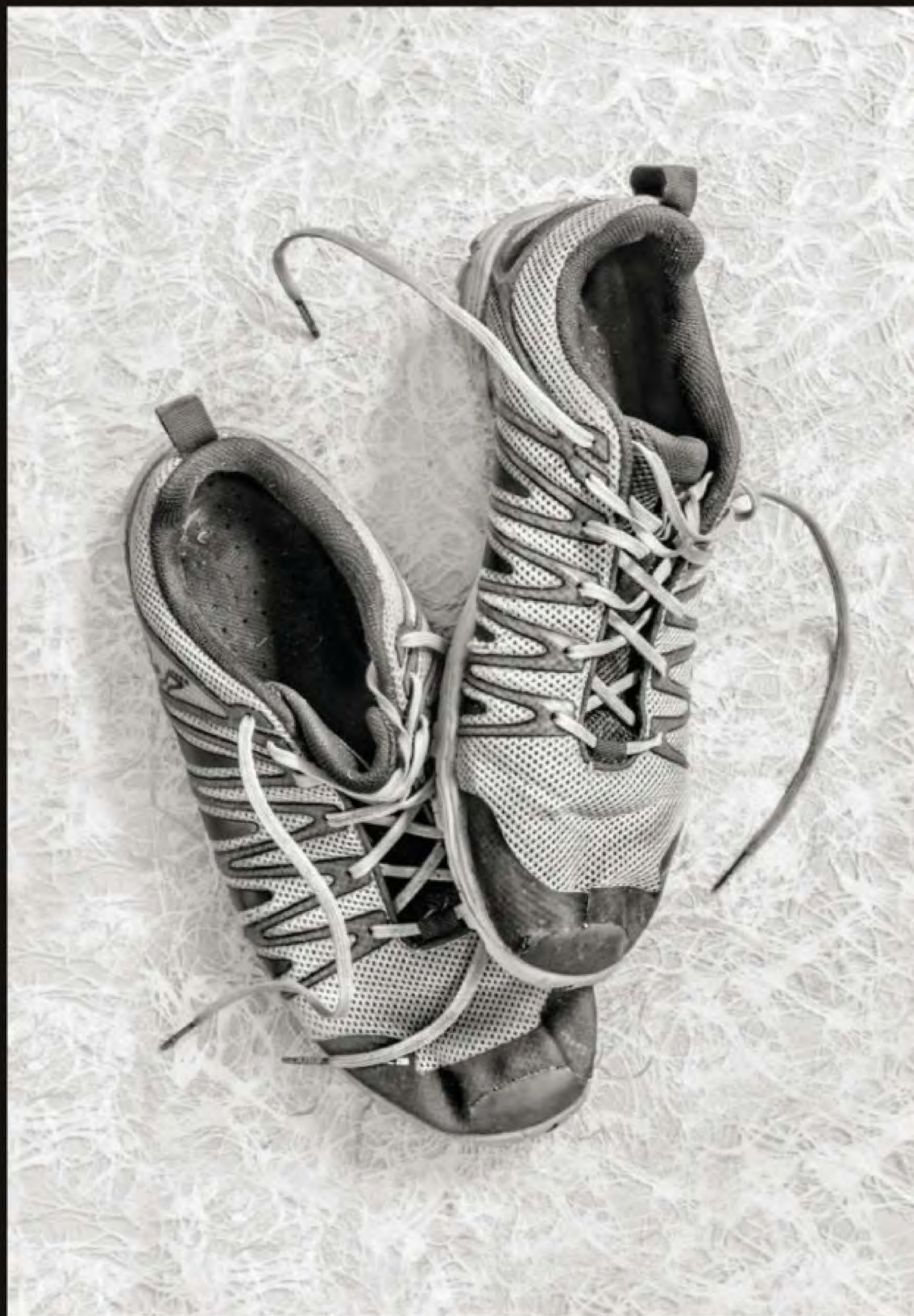
Gourmet and Astro descend Fuller Ridge, the skinny part of a mountain just west of Palm Springs, and the start of a 15-mile downhill. It's hot, 80, 90, 100 degrees. Gourmet, hiking ahead of Astro, notices a living room-size cave, shaded and out of the sun, and ducks in for a 10-minute break.

At the next road crossing, Gourmet stops and waits on Astro. Hours go by as Gourmet grows impatient, then worried. Then Astro traipses down the trail wearing an expression of bemused satisfaction. "Oh hi, Gourmet!" Andy says.

"What happened to you? You OK?" Gourmet asks.

"I took a wonderful nap in the cave back there," Andy answers. "It was the perfect rest spot. I couldn't pass it up."

Even in the early stages, where most



thru-hikers concern themselves with making miles and wringing distance out of daylight, Andy feels no such urgency. He doesn't tell his new friend that he intends to savor every moment on the trail as if it might be his last.

Under the setting sun, they cross the desert floor toward Cabazon, where trail angels welcome hikers with a hot foot soak. Andy sags, eyes shut, head in hands, with his feet in the tub. The next day, he announces that he's taking a rest day. "I'm sorry, Gourmet," he says. "You should definitely hike, though." And just like that, fast friends become memories.

ANDY'S TRAIL RUNNERS, GOOD for about 500 MILES

The trail in Southern California is like a long and winding ramp. It delivers hikers over the forested crest of the same San Gabriel Mountains Andy saw from his hospital bed during the stem-cell transplant. He's moving well now, 20, 25 miles per day, but he doesn't hurry. ¶ He stops to take selfies, which he's never really done before. In one, he's standing in

front of a chestnut-brown horse grazing on the trail. He's smiling next to its shoulder, where a heart is outlined in white fur. He is always finding hearts. He sends the photos to his mom.

He arrives in Big Bear, where Betsy is waiting to drive him a few miles to the family's cabin at Lake Arrowhead, a deep, cold, fir-fringed lake in San Bernadino National Forest.

It's a huge house, complete with a yoga studio, in a peaceful spot. Andy wants to fill the place with thru-hikers. Betsy, always game, buys food to host. It's what she does for her son. Even when Andy recently crashed her anniversary dinner at a fancy restaurant, she didn't mind. She'd have a lot more anniversaries. What parent would say no?

A few calls later, Andy learns his friends are hiking on; it'll be just the two of them. But that's fine. They've been tight since Betsy carried the family through a divorce from Andy's father, John, years earlier, when his drinking got out of control. Over the next few days, Betsy, a yoga and meditation teacher, leads Andy through poses to loosen up his tight muscles. They also crank disco tunes—Andy's favorite—and dance like crazy. She drops him off at 8:30 p.m. on a Sunday night and he hikes back into the darkness, buoyed against the loneliness of solo hiking.

"Andy was happy out exploring," Betsy says. "Our hope was that his elation over these life experiences, and the freedom to do whatever he wanted with his precious life, would bring peace. And of course, we always hoped for a miracle."

A few weeks later, needing another break, he rides the train home to Laguna Beach and immediately settles into old routines. He goes hiking with his sister, Alex, and dog, Luna, and when Luna gets tired after a few miles, he scoops her up and carries her. The rest is dining at good restaurants, insisting on the most comfy pillows, bowling, and letting his little sister look after him. "He liked being independent because it gave him a sense of strength," Alex says. "But he also liked being spoiled."

Back on the trail four days later, Andy pulls out the voice recorder he'd

taken from home. He's always been a private person, someone it took a while to get to know, but, at his mom's urging, he'd decided to share this journey. He clicks on the recorder. "Even at home," he says, "I was itching to get back on the trail and I can tell that's what my body likes right now, and what my mind likes right now is the peace and simplicity of walking every day."

At the edge of the Mojave Desert, he clicks on his voice recorder again. "I'm kinda having fun with this voice memo thing, so I'll do another one that's more personal, maybe." Then he exhales. "It's going good. You know, actually it's going really good. Every day is like," and he laughs and changes his mind mid-sentence, "more challenges. Every day, I'm like, 'Goddammit, why am I doing this?'"

There is pain now and it reaches beyond the blisters, bites, and bruises all thru-hikers deal with. "What happens is my belly, the upper right side of my abdomen, gets sore. If you push on it, it's very tender and then I begin to feel angry. I begin to feel anger, frustration, rage for even the littlest provocation."

But a few moments later, he's back on the recorder, exuding calm. "When you're satisfied with the present moment in every moment, that's pure joy," he says. Then adds, "I'm walking in this desert, among these Joshua trees, and it's beautiful."

"GUESS WHERE I AM!" Andy says to Betsy in a phone call at 10 a.m. in early June. She thinks, hopes, it's a trick question. "Hiking the Pacific Crest Trail?" she ventures. Andy shouts, "I'm on top of Mt. Whitney!" The landscape all around him falls away in spikes and columns of gray stone against a brisk, blue sky.

Andy explains, "It was here and I was here, so I figured, why not?"

At least, that's what he tells his mom. Most thru-hikers are trail-toned and suntanned at this point. To climb an extra 4,000 feet over 8 miles seems like a pittance for the chance to stand atop the tallest mountain in the Lower 48.

Andy, hobbled in recent days with a new pain in his left foot, pushed his body beyond anything he'd yet experienced to get up Whitney. He had to make it to the summit—an exercise in mind over matter that tested his whole idea for this journey. If he can make it up Whitney, he thought, maybe he really *can* make it to Canada.

On the way down, his foot seizes with each step, shooting pain into his spine, electrifying all the other muscles on the way—foot, calf, knee, groin, pelvis, back, and heart. It's like a clamp on his entire being, but he continues, alone. He has to make it 7 miles to the base of Forester Pass, so he can cross it the next morning,

before the storms roll in.

He starts to whimper under the strain, but knows he must drive himself past the place where physical pain controls his mind. It's the only way he can uncouple the two. Over 3 miles, his groans build into yelps, become a rising cry of *Why? Why? Why! WHY!*

Then his father's face comes into his mind.

Andy's dad has been gone for 15 years. Drank himself out of the family, and, years later, to death. Andy never understood, but as a boy he felt guilty, like he could have saved his dad. He once confided to a friend that it had made his heart become like a closed fist. The tension spread through his body, and that, he thinks, is where his cancer came from.

He begins to cry.

Then he screams, "You did this to me! You motherfucker! Do you see what you did? Seven years have passed and I'm still dealing with this! Can you feel this? Do you know how this feels?!"

Andy wants to let go of it now, to give his mind and body a reprieve from the pain and stress caused by the absence of his father's love. He sits by a log and sobs and addresses his father. "You did this to me," he says. "But I forgive you."

Then, with a surge of clenching agony, the tightness in his foot releases. And for that moment, there is no more pain.

If it were only that easy. The fall of 2011 delivered 180 mph winds to the Mammoth area, leveling 400,000 mature pines and rearranging them in a heap. It makes for slow

going as Andy and Michael hike together for a few days.

Michael's been Andy's stepdad for 13 years and his friend for longer. At the southern terminus, he'd given Andy a credit card for the kind of trouble he could buy his way out of, and advice for the rest. He's an experienced outdoorsman, quick with a quip, and accustomed to being the stronger hiker when the two of them make miles together. The first thing he notices about Andy is that he's lost weight. The second is his new easiness on the trail.

"He had a self-confidence on the trail that surpassed mine," Michael later says. "He was extremely comfortable." Andy's once-white shirt is formless and streaked with brown beneath his shoulder straps. His Gilligan hat is stacked with sweat rings. At the southern terminus in April, Andy's ultralight gear was top-of-the-line but unused. Up until

then, he'd tallied maybe five nights on backpacking trips. Now, he doesn't use a tent—he doesn't even *carry* a tent—preferring to sleep outside, under the stars.

As they hike, Andy tells Michael about a dinner he had a week ago in the Golden Trout Wilderness. He took off his pants and waded into a stream, hemmed in by bare granite mountain-tops, and watched the water. When a fish swam by, he'd scoop his hands in and splash it onto the banks. After a little while, a dinner's worth of golden trout lay gasping in the grass. He cooked them over a fire and ate them, bones and all.

A few days later, Michael flies back home, and Andy proceeds alone through the grand High Sierra. It's Ansel Adams country, a kind of walk-through miracle over an endless succession of high-mountain passes, each one more dazzling than the last. But whatever Andy thinks about this glorious stretch, he doesn't record it. He goes silent, taking not a single note, nor clicking on his voice recorder. If he can manage his story well enough, can he delete his sickness from it? Can he make it go away?

But at the end of this stretch, in Yosemite's Tuolumne Meadows, he's lonely and in pain again. He can feel his liver swollen to twice its normal size, killing him under his hipbelt. He flies back home to Laguna Beach, and a few days' rest stretches past a week.

Andy talks about going back to Berkeley, maybe opening a café, or studying healing. Betsy won't watch him loaf. She delivers an ultimatum: "You've got two choices: You can either get back on the trail, or get a job, because we're not going to support you."

Andy packs up the next day.

THE REST OF CALIFORNIA is ablaze in one of the worst wildfire seasons in recent memory, but Andy works his way around on a network of trails and roads, friends and trail angels. After the first miles of central Oregon's dark and broken lava fields, he makes camp near a road and packs a tiny bowl of medical marijuana.

His thoughts turn inward. "I had waves of pain, which I was convinced were signs of my ill health and my imminent demise," he later says. "I know there is something in my body that is a dark force." But he's hopeful that if he can accept this, it will finally let him be.

Then, the thought pierces through that the trip is a failure—that he is a failure and he can't do anything right and he is going to die and it is going to be his fault. And when he does, his mom and Alex and Michael will be sad and that would be his fault. He wants out. "I got the idea that I should hike on that night, continue hiking into the lava fields and somehow that would be like crossing the River Styx," he says. "I thought I



would need to have a near-death experience, another transcendent experience where the last tethers of the ego would be cut and I would be free and then healing of my body and mind would happen naturally and rapidly."

But he is too afraid of the lava field.

He lies awake for most of the night, thoughts racing but paralyzed, until exhaustion takes him around dawn. A few hours later, he gets up. By the light of day, the lava looks easy.

Hours later, he arrives at Big Lake Youth Camp, where his next resupply

***NO ONE UNDERSTOOD** why **ANDY LOVED** this **SUN HAT** so **MUCH**.*

box is waiting. When he picks up his package he notices that on the rack nearby sits the box of Scott Williamson, legendary PCT speed hiker (who had given up his speed attempt this year due to fires). Williamson is a hero to most thru-hikers, and Andy feels an urge to open the box just to see what's in there—but he resists. Many other hikers had been content to simply take a photo.

But then Andy opens his own box and finds it's a few dinners light. He thinks, "Well, Scott, he's off-trail, he's not going to use this box or what's in it." He finds jellybeans, Snickers Bars, tortilla chips and dried refried beans, electrolyte packets, a tiny sack of toiletries, and two new pairs of nylon socks.

To set things right, he writes a letter to Scott and tapes it into the box. "I figure if anyone's resupply would give me the extra physical, mental, and spiritual boost I need at this point, it would be yours."

Andy walks out of Big Lake and logs the biggest day of his hike so far: 29.6 miles. In Scott Williamson's socks.

MOST THRU-HIKERS look forward to reaching southern Washington's Knife Edge. It's a sharp ridge of black rock, knapped by time into a 2-foot-wide blade that cuts the snow-smeared Goat Rocks Wilderness in two. It's a spectacular milestone, a dizzying catwalk signaling there are only 350 miles left before the Canadian border.

But Andy cannot share the other hikers' enthusiasm. It's late September when he limps up to it and steadies himself on his trekking poles. The hike has progressed well since he acquired Williamson's socks, but just when his strength and stamina seemed to peak, his right leg started buckling, making him stumble and fall.

Now, with the world falling away a thousand feet on either side, he weights his right leg. It collapses, sending his knee down onto the rock. He lifts himself back onto his trekking poles. His leg has given up, but that doesn't mean he has to. He heaves it forward again and leans onto his poles to swivel around his good leg. He collapses again. He crawls forward. He gets up.

Two in three would-be thru-hikers quit before they make it to the end of the PCT. Most simply get tired, worn out by the compounding aches and pains. Mile by mile, Andy has been amassing a body of evidence that he's one of the toughest hikers out there. He's proving himself stronger than the cancer with every forward step. But as he crawls along the rock, he knows he cannot go on. He cannot crawl to Canada.

He tells his recent hiking companion, Wolverine, a veteran of long trails, that

he needs to go to a hospital. By luck, Wolverine has friends picking him up a few miles ahead in White Pass. They drive Andy into Yakima, Washington, and drop him off at the doors of the emergency room.

He limps in out of the night and tells the nurse his story.

Hours later, a full battery of tests reveals a large mass pressing on Andy's spine. It's a new tumor and it's responsible for the weakness and numbness in his leg that's causing him to fall.

The doctor on duty prescribes pain meds. Betsy and Michael grab the packed go-bag of Andy's street clothes and take the first flight in. The next day, Andy learns of a new chemo drug, called Adcetris, recently approved and not widely available. Yakima Valley Memorial, in tiny Yakima, Washington (population 90,000), was the first place in the country to buy it. It shrinks tumors rapidly, especially in cases like Andy's, in which Hodgkin's lymphoma has relapsed after a stem-cell transplant. But it's not a miracle. The doctor says it'll only buy him time.

Time is what Andy needs. It's early October by now—late in the PCT season—and cold rain is coming to the high country of northern Washington. Snow won't be far behind, and then the trail will effectively close. Betsy and Andy sit together in the hospital room, waiting to discuss the new drug with the doctor—contemplating whether or not Andy should give Western medicine another try.

Word trickles out: There is a scruffy-faced hiker with advanced cancer who walked here from Mexico. A nurse strolls in, tells them he's arranging for a horse so Andy can finish his journey. Next, a social worker comes in with paperwork from the Dream Foundation for a grant to pay for the horses. Then the phone rings; it's the owner of a packhorse outfitter. She wants to hook Andy up with a horse, a wrangler, and whatever else he needs. Then the press coordinator asks about a news story; then the TV crews arrive.

In an interview with KEPR News, Andy tells the reporter: "One of the greatest blessings I've gotten from this whole experience with cancer and healing is the freedom and the drive to do whatever I want to do."

Now, his story is out and everyone knows. And in a way, it's gratifying. "I've walked all this way suffering," Andy tells his mom. "It's about time someone noticed."

Three days after he comes off the trail, Andy sits in a hospital bed with an IV line in his arm. The Adcetris drips in. His hike has delivered him to one of the few hospitals in the country that has the medicine. Who is he to deny fate? The next morning, he reports the numbness and tingling have subsided enough that he wants to continue. But not with a

horse. "If I'm going to finish the trail," he tells his mom, "it's going to be with these feet."

He hefts his pack, pockets his prescription steroids, and walks on. He's making his own miracles now.

There's a parable about death that Andy and his Ayurvedic practitioner, Rob, shared together months before Andy started hiking. *When the flowers in the garden know tomorrow is their turn to be plucked, the lesson goes, Do they feel sadness? Do their faces droop? Are they any less bright? No. The moment they know that the next day it is their turn, they make themselves ready with great gusto and excitement.*

Betsy drops Andy at a hotel in Snoqualmie, Washington. His friends and fellow hikers are there. Between the rancid gear and body odor, it reeks inside, but Andy meets the dense air with the Yakima *Herald* held aloft, his grinning mug pasted across the front page and one to match in real life.

A few days later, heading north out of Skykomish, with 172 miles left to the northern terminus, the trail becomes a rocky, hard-scrabble way, winding over mountain passes where glaciers cling to the slopes. The sky is textured gray and full of rain.

The trail is gone, replaced by a rushing stream of cold runoff. Water fills Andy's fifth pair of trail runners. Sometimes it's so cold he can't touch pinky to thumb. He clips his tent canopy (he'd gotten it back when the rains came) to its poles using his teeth. The rain is so loud at night that he has to put in earplugs.

Today, flush with food from his last resupply, he tells his fellow thru-hikers Scrub Rat and Doe Eyes that he's going to stay put and wait out the weather. For days, if that's what it takes. The pair leaves camp and the lashing rains soak them through. The shivering starts soon enough. They're moving slowly. "Our gear was failing," Doe Eyes later says. "We were soaked to the bone and filled with fear about hypothermia. And here comes Astro, jaunting up the trail, his gear soaked, his rain jacket wide open. Fearless."

Andy continues ahead, moving slightly faster than the pair, and begins the long ascent to Ptarmigan Glacier, blue ice mashed against the gray rock and gray sky. The climb is endless, and

he begins to despair, his burst of energy long since depleted. Tears of fear join tears seeking mercy from the mountain. On the way down, every other step he slips and every fifth step he falls—his leg is still sore.

"There was a period most of the day today where my thumbs were so numb that I couldn't even unzip anything. I had to open Ziploc bags by ripping them with my teeth. I sped as fast as I could," he tells his voice recorder that night. He knows, like all the hikers do, that if he can't stay dry, he could freeze to death within hours.

For so long, death had been a distant stalker, hidden behind the uncertainty of months to come and solutions left to try. Now it's come in close.

But so has support. Led by Betsy and Deon English, an affable drug rep with Seattle Genetics (the maker of Adcetris), Team Astro comes together to get Andy through to the end.

In search of help for on-the-ground logistics, Deon connects Michael to a friend of hers named Dave Leffmann, who calls his friend, Marc Fendel, who just finished a PCT thru-hike of his own in September. Dave tells Marc the story of a kid with late-stage cancer that has been thru-hiking. Kid's name is Astro. Does he know him?

He does. To most people, Marc is Marc. But to a very rarified tribe, he is Gourmet, the guy who had given Astro his trail name all those months and miles and mountains ago. Of course he remembers him. There are people in this world who leave a mark after only the slightest brush. Andy is one of them. "How can we not do this?" Gourmet says to Dave.

Team Astro mobilizes for the final push to the border. Andy, Dave, Gourmet, and Michael set out from Harts Pass, 29.4 miles from the end. The trail is high in this part, sliding across the side of a mountain with views of snow-dusted peaks that stretch into Canada. They walk together in a snow trench. That night, it pours cold rain, but they can stand up and cook under Dave's giant tarp. They devour the goodies that Gourmet packed in: soup, bread and cheese, chocolate.

On October 19, 2012, Andy wakes up on the day before he was supposed to die. He wakes up and shakes the water off his tent and unzips from the warmth of his sleeping bag. He packs his bag by muscle memory. He is 15 miles from a forest clearing that holds a five-part



wooden monument with the PCT's insignia driven into its crown.

They lope along fast, staying warm in the cold and damp. Michael feels like he's jogging. Gourmet's been here before and marks the miles: two more to go. Andy says, "I'm gonna make it. I can't believe it." With a mile to go, the emotion begins to seize him—part elation, part relief, part something only he knows. He thanks everyone for being here. With 100 yards to go, the trail widens enough between the trees to walk two abreast. Michael and Andy walk arm in arm under a sagging sky.

At 5 p.m., Team Astro enters the clearing and approaches the monument. This is his moment, the end of the journey on which he set the terms of his future by focusing on the now. He is supposed to be standing here cured and triumphant with a story of strength and courage that he can use to help heal others. Does it matter that it didn't work out that way?

Andy doesn't say much. He walks up to the wooden monument and reaches

A MOMENT of PURE BLISS at the TRAIL'S NORTHERN TERMINUS

out to it with his cold, red-raw hands. His hair is wet with sweat and rain and matted to his face. In this single, perfect moment, he is alive and free from whatever came before and whatever comes next. He closes his eyes, leans in toward the monument, and then, gives it a kiss. ■

Ten months after finishing the PCT, Andy steadies himself against the railing as he walks to the Crystal Hermitage Guest House at Ananda Village, his spiritual community in Northern California. Four days later, on the morning of August 30, his mother wakes him so they can watch the dawn. It is Andy's last sunrise.

Casey Lyons is senior editor.

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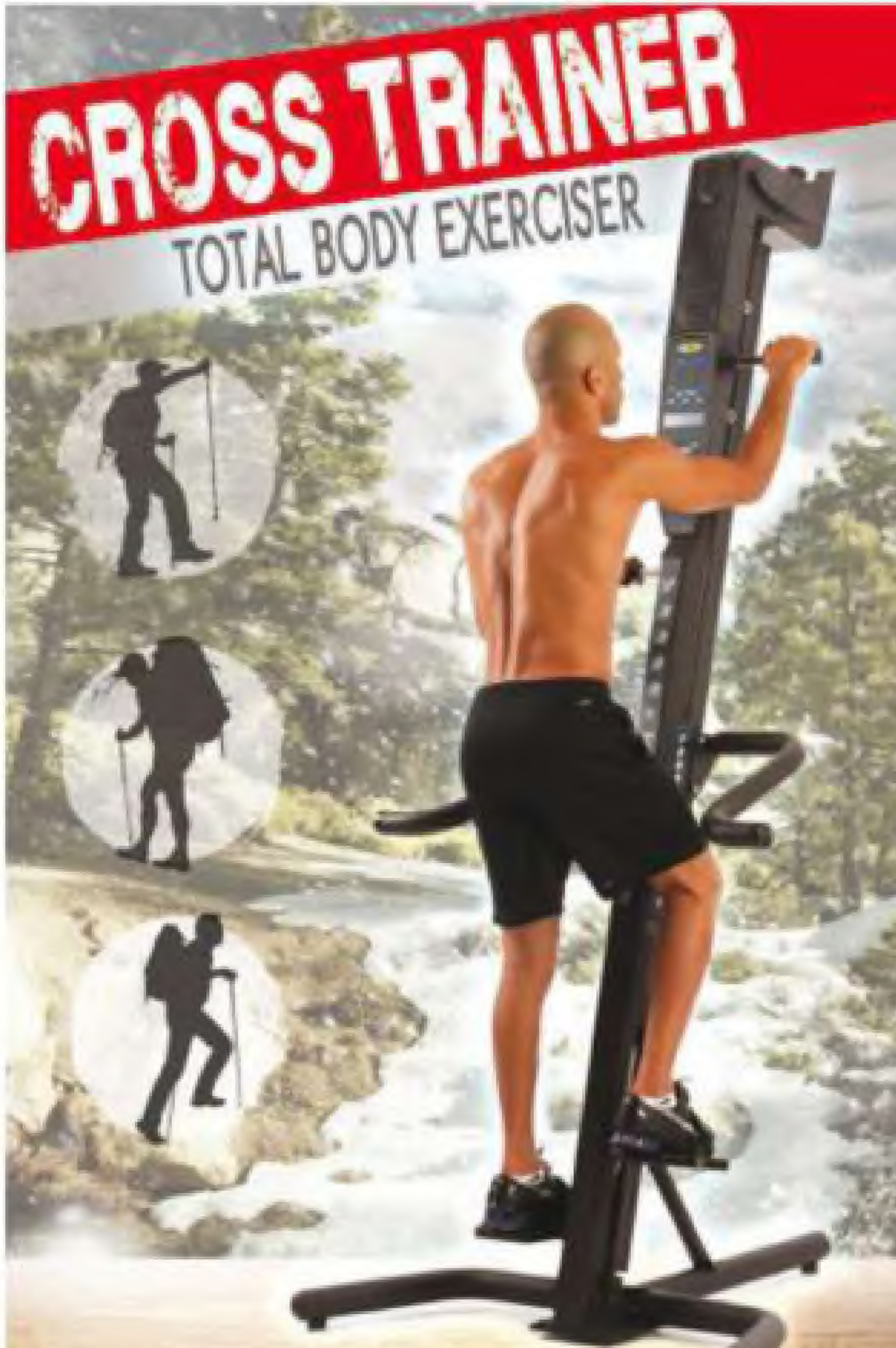
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uncovered

Hike to this month's cover shot.

Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park

Walk amid giants in this hidden gem on the California coast.

Basecamp plan

Towering old-growth redwoods guard the Jedediah Smith Campground, which sits just east of the Smith River, the last major undammed waterway in the state. Try for site #52, a secluded tent-only space with an open vista to the river. Stage your dayhikes from here. **Info** \$35/night; from May 15 through September 15, book at reserveamerica.com; walk-up the rest of the year

Backpacking itinerary

There's no backcountry camping in Jed Smith, but there's a sweet trail that starts in the state park before crossing into Redwood National Park. From the Little Bald Hills trailhead, head 3.3 miles south, gaining 1,800 feet through conifer forest and prairielands, to the five Little Bald Hills sites (free permit required). **Info** nps.gov/redw

Built to last

Coast redwoods are resistant to insects, fungi, and fire.

18

distance, in miles, of hiking trails here

26

diameter, in feet, of the largest (not tallest) coast redwood, which is somewhere in the park

240

height, in feet, of an average mature (several hundred years old) coast redwood

2-3

annual growth, in feet, of an average coast redwood

Get here

Take the 4-mile Mill Creek Trail from Stout Grove. **Contact** bit.do/JedSmithSP

The Challenge

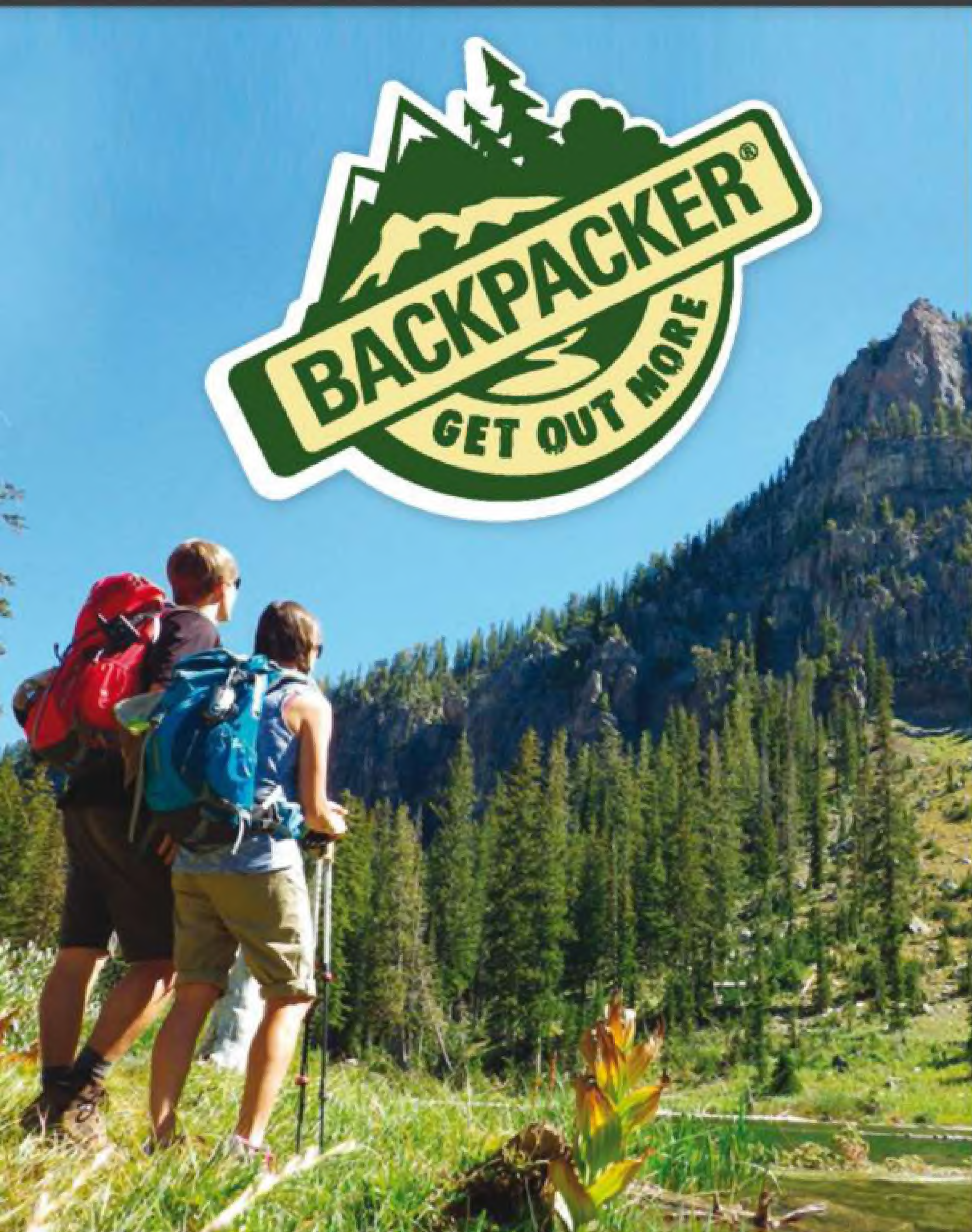
A fabled stand of redwoods called Grove of Titans lies hidden somewhere in the park. It includes some of the largest-known coast redwoods on earth, and purportedly boasts the biggest one by volume, the Lost Monarch. Park officials won't disclose its whereabouts, but you get one clue: "[It's in] the bottom of a hidden notch-like valley near a glade." Learn more at groveoftitans.com.

PHOTOS BY LINKED RING PHOTOGRAPHY. TEXT BY MAREN HORJUS

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